JOE STRONG *the* BOY WIZARD

VANCE BARNUM

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OR

THE MYSTERIES OF MAGIC EXPOSED

BY

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Author of "Joe Strong on the Trapeze," "Joe Strong, the Boy Fish," "Joe Strong on the High Wire," "Joe Strong and His Wings of Steel," etc.

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BOOKS FOR BOYS
BY
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THE JOE STRONG SERIES

JOE STRONG, THE BOY WIZARD
Or, The Mysteries of Magic Exposed

JOE STRONG ON THE TRAPEZE
Or, The Daring Feats of a Young Circus Performer

JOE STRONG, THE BOY FISH
Or, Marvelous Doings in a Big Tank

JOE STRONG ON THE HIGH WIRE
Or, Motor-Cycle Perils of the Air

JOE STRONG AND HIS WINGS OF STEEL
Or, A Young Acrobat in the Clouds

JOE STRONG — HIS BOX OF MYSTERY
Or, The Ten Thousand Dollar Prize Trick

JOE STRONG, THE BOY FIRE EATER
Or, The Most Dangerous Performance on Record

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JOE STRONG, THE BOY WIZARD

CHAPTER I

JOE SOLVES A PUZZLE

"How did he do it? That's what I'd like to know."

"So would I. It sure was a queer trick all right —and it looked so easy, too."

"Well, I've tried to guess, but I can't. The more I think of it the more I believe that the professor really is a magician, in a certain way."

"Pooh! It couldn't be anything like that! It was just a trick, like all the others he did. But I'd like to know how to do it."

Four boys sat under the shade of a big willow tree in a grassy meadow on the bank of a stream. They were earnestly discussing something, the import of which may be gathered from their talk.

"I tried to do the trick after I got home last night," confessed Harry Martin.

"You didn't do it, did you?" asked Charlie Ford, rumpling up his red hair. Charlie was not at all ashamed of his red hair. His sister Mazie called it "auburn," but Charlie himself stuck to plain "red."

"Do it? I should say not!" cried Harry. "I didn't come within a mile of it, and our folks just laughed at me."

"And yet how easy Professor Rosello did it," observed Henry Blake.

"Yes, and he didn't have any machinery or truck on the stage to do it with, as he had for his other tricks," remarked Tom Simpson. "All he had was a plain slate, same as the little kids use in our school."

"It must have been a trick slate," said Harry. "That's the only way I can account for the figures getting on it."

"No, there wasn't any trick about the slate," declared Charlie Ford. "I was sitting right up front, and he passed the slate to me first, to look at. There wasn't a sign of a number on it when I had it."

"And you handed it right over to Mr. Burton to hold, didn't you?" asked Tom.

"Yes; and Mr. Burton held it until the figures came out on it—under the handkerchief, of course. It sure was a good trick." Charlie shook his head in wonderment.

"I'd like to know how it was done," said Henry Blake. "But I don't s'pose he'd tell us if we asked him. He's in town yet. I saw him around the hotel when I came past a little while ago."

"It isn't very likely he'd tell us how he did it," said Harry. "That's the way he makes his living —by doing magical tricks—and it isn't to be supposed that he'd give away his secrets. But all the same——"

"Hello, fellows! What's up now?" asked a new voice. "Talking secrets that you don't want me to hear?"

The four boys, gathered under the willow tree, looked up quickly. Looks of welcome accompanied by smiles greeted the newcomer.

"Hello, Joe!" shouted Charlie Ford.

"Say, you're looking good!" added Tom.

"I'm feeling good," was the response. "What's up?"

"Oh, we're just talking about the show last night. You were there, weren't you?"

"Yes, I saw the great Professor Alonzo Rosello give his world-mystifying exhibition of black and allied arts," and Joe smiled as he quoted from the circulars that had been scattered broadcast over the town of Bedford, advertising the exhibition given in the Opera House the previous evening.

"What did you think of him?" asked Henry Blake.

"Why, he was pretty fair in some things," said Joe, slowly.

"Pretty fair? Why, say! he was great!" cried Tom Simpson. "I'd like to see you do even the simplest trick that he did!"

"Perhaps I can," replied Joe, quietly.

His chums looked curiously at him. And, for the moment, we can do no better than to observe this boy, who had sunk down in an easy position on the grass. A moment's study of him now will help greatly in understanding the nature of a youth destined to have many curious and thrilling adventures. And he was a lad well adapted by nature for a life of daring excitement.

Briefly, Joe Strong was a remarkable boy. From the time of his early infancy he had never known what it was to be ill or ailing. Even the simplest childish diseases seemed to pass him by as one too strong and sturdy to try to weaken. He had a superb physical form, and as soon as he was old enough to take regular exercise he added to his suppleness and strength in a systematic way.

There was no better runner, jumper, swimmer, diver or all-around athlete in Bedford than Joe Strong. Added to this he could ride any horse he ever saw; he could climb to the roof of the church and walk the ridge pole, with never a qualm of dizziness; he was an excellent shot with a rifle; and he could juggle with stones, baseball bats, balls—

in fact with almost anything that he could handle. Taking it all in all, Joe was rather remarkable.

Another point in his favor, and one that was destined to stand him in good stead in after life, was the fact that he seemed absolutely without nerves. Rather be it said that his nerves were under such perfect control that he was their master, not their slave. It took high-strung but perfectly controlled nerves to do some of the things Joe did.

The secret of his abilities, if secret it was, lay in the fact that his mother, now dead some years, had been one of the most daring bareback riders in any circus that ever toured the country. She was billed as Madame Hortense, though her name was Mrs. Janet Strong. She was an English woman, and Joe dimly remembered hearing that before her marriage her name had been Willoughby. Beyond that fact he knew little of his mother's early history.

But it was not alone from his mother that Joe inherited certain health, nerve, daring, ability to ride a horse and to take risks higher up off this solid earth than most persons care to go. He also was indebted to his father for many of his talents and abilities.

Professor Morretti—known in private life as Alexander Strong—had been in his day, one of the best-known and best-drawing (from a theatrical standpoint) magicians that ever brought a live rab-

bit out of a silk hat, or locked himself up in a solid box, only to be found missing when the box was opened, the professor himself afterward walking coolly down the aisle of the playhouse.

Thus Joe inherited two totally different sets of talents. And that was about all he had inherited from his parents. For they had both died when he was about five years old, the professor first, following a severe attack of pneumonia contracted when one of his water tricks went wrong, and he received a drenching on a zero night.

Mrs. Strong did not long survive her husband. Perhaps she lost her nerve, following news of his sudden death. At that they were traveling in different shows, Joe being with his mother. Usually, however, Professor Morretti and Madame Hortense went about together, caring for little Joe between them.

Only a few months after the professor died, Madame Hortense had a bad fall from a new horse she was trying, and she received injuries which resulted in her death in a few weeks.

Joe was left alone in the world, with only an inheritance of a superb set of muscles, nerves, hawk-like eyes and an active brain.

The circus people were kind to him, and did what they could, but a circus is not the best place in the world for an orphan boy, and the manager soon realized this.

Consequently he was glad to read an advertisement of a couple who wanted to adopt a strong, healthy boy of about Joe's age. Letters were written, and Mr. Amos Blackford came on with his wife to have a look at Joe.

Mr. Beeze, the circus manager, had artfully neglected to state, in his early letters, the fact that Joe was the orphan of a bareback rider and a "Professor of Black Art and Magic"; and when Mr. and Mrs. Blackford discovered this they were well-nigh horrified. For they were old-fashioned persons, with very strict ideas about right and wrong, and to them a woman who rode a horse in a circus was a person not to be admitted to the best society, and they regarded the dead Professor Morretti in about the same light as they would an outlaw.

At first they were going back without Joe. But Mrs. Blackford could not resist the heart-appeal of the attractive little chap, and so he was taken, and carried to the Blackford home in Bedford by his foster-parents, who had since brought him up.

They had done well by Joe, as far as their rather narrow minds let them. They treated Joe harshly at times, without understanding that they did so. They wanted him to forget that he was ever in a circus, that his mother ever rode bareback, and that his father juggled Indian clubs and produced live rabbits from the vest pockets of innocent persons in the audience.

But Joe could not forget those things. He had been born in a circus, and the smell of the sawdust, the jungle odor from the animal tent, always brought back to him, most vividly, his early days.

He had not lived long in Bedford before he became known as a daring little fellow. Mrs. Blackford nearly fainted when once she saw him walking the back fence like a tight rope, with a clothes pole as a balancer in his chubby hands.

And from then on, by gradual stages, Joe advanced to more and more daring tricks, until one day on a challenge he walked the ridgepole of the church.

His foster father whipped him for that—whipped him cruelly—and from that time Joe came to dislike, with a dislike that never ceased, the man who had brought him up. From then on his life was more or less miserable. But he did not give up what was born to him in his blood. In secret he imitated the acts of circus performers, remembering some of them from his childhood days, seeing pictures of others on the gaudy fence bills, and, rarely, getting into a show himself. That was his seventh heaven of delight.

As the years went on, Joe gained in health, strength, nerve and daring. Joe was not a paragon —far from it. But he was certainly a remarkable youth, and perhaps "daring" is the best word to use in describing him. He seemed never to be afraid

to take a chance, but, if the truth were known, his keen eye and active brain had already figured the chances out in his favor before he undertook any feat.

And now, on this sunny day, he was sitting under a willow tree with his companions, discussing a show given the night before by Professor Rosello.

"Do you mean to tell me, Joe," asked Tom Simpson, "that you can do *any* of those tricks the professor did?"

"Some of 'em, yes," answered Joe. "Of course I can't do those that need a whole lot of trick apparatus, a darkened stage, and all that. I could if I had the stuff. But I think I can do the one you were talking about as I came up," and Joe regarded his companions with sparkling eyes.

"You mean the slate trick?" asked Harry.

"Yes. Adding up a sum and making the answer come on the slate. I could do that now, if I had the slate. That was the only trick thing about it all."

"Was that slate a trick one?" asked Charlie, rumpling up his red hair.

"Yes. It was a trick slate, but not very complicated. Now just watch a moment and I'll do the trick, as nearly like the professor as is possible. I guess I've got some papers and a pencil."

From his pocket Joe brought out some white slips and a stub of a pencil.

"Now you fellows just sit in a row a little way

apart, and I'll pretend this is the stage," went on Joe, as he stood beside a flat stump near the willow tree. "Here, Charlie, you put down a number on this slip of paper. Any number of four figures, say 1,876, or anything you like."

"All right," said Charlie, and he wrote a number.

"Now, Harry, you set down a number under Charlie's," directed Joe, "and then it will be Henry's turn. This is the way the professor did it, isn't it?"

"Yes, only he talked more," replied Tom.

"Well, I could sling the 'patter,' as they call it, if I wanted to," said Joe. "Only as I'm going to show you how the trick is worked I don't need a lot of talk."

"Are you really going to show us?" asked Harry.

"Sure I am! Now, Harry, if you've got your number written pass the paper to Henry. You set down a number of four figures, Henry, and draw a line under the sum. Tom, you're pretty good at addition, aren't you?"

"Pretty fair, yes."

"Well, I don't want any mistake made," Joe, with a smile, warned them. "Here you go now. Add up those figures Tom, and get 'em right," and he passed a slip of paper to the boy who had not set down any of the numbers. "Add 'em up, and set the result down in pencil under the line Henry drew. When you've done that I'll make the

answer appear on this flat piece of stone. Here, you hold it, Charlie," and picking up a flat stone from the ground, Joe threw his handkerchief over it and passed it to Charlie to hold. "Don't take off the handkerchief until I tell you to," he warned the lad.

"Is the sum added, Tom?" asked Joe, a moment later.

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"Ten thousand, four hundred and sixty-seven."

"Good!" cried Joe, and, unconsciously perhaps, he imitated the language, manner and gestures of Professor Rosello. "Now then," went on the boy wizard, "you three boys each set down a separate number. None of you knew what the others wrote, and Tom, who didn't write any figures, announces the sum of the other three fellows' numbers to be ten thousand four hundred and sixty-seven. Am I right, Tom?"

"That's right. Here's the paper. I'm sure I added 'em up right."

"Well, I've no doubt but you did, Tom. Now then, I think you'll agree that I didn't know beforehand what numbers you fellows were going to write, so, of couse, I couldn't tell what they'd add up to. Could I?"

"I don't see how you could," admitted Henry, but a little doubtfully.

"Well, now comes the magic part. I'm going, without touching it, to cause this sum, which Tom announces as ten thousand four hundred and sixty-seven, to appear on that flat stone Charlie holds under the handkerchief. I won't touch the stone, which answers the same purpose as the professor's slate. But I'll take the paper you have, Tom, with the sum of ten thousand four hundred and sixty seven on it," and Joe did so.

"Now to make the trick more simple I'll just burn this paper with the sum on, where you can all see it," Joe went on. He held up the paper in plain sight and set fire to it with a match.

"I will now pronounce the magic words: *oshkala-loolu, presto, smacko!* The sum has now vanished in smoke, and will appear on the flat stone. Charlie, lift the handkerchief and hold up the stone so we can all see it."

Charlie did so, and there, in black pencil on the gray surface of the stone, was the answer to the little sum—10,467!

"Whew!" whistled Charlie. "How under the sun did you do it, Joe?"

"And right under our very noses, too!" added Tom, in amazement.

CHAPTER II

A FIREWORKS FIRE

JOE STRONG smiled at the puzzled looks on the faces of his chums. They were eagerly watching him now, as if asking what he would do next.

"No, I can't do anything more just now," he said in answer to the implied request. "I can't produce a guinea pig from Tom's ear, nor a bowl of gold fish from under my shirt; though I might if I were loaded for those tricks."

"Loaded?" asked Charlie, curiously.

"Yes, that is what a magician calls it when he comes out on the stage, with the secret pockets of his dress suit filled with the things he needs for tricks. He may 'load' himself with a bowl of gold fish or a couple of rabbits."

"Alive?" asked Henry.

"Sure! Wasn't the rabbit alive Professor Rosello took out of dad's hat last night?" asked Tom.

"How did he do that?" Charlie interrogated. "Can you tell us, Joe?"

"Yes, I can, but——"

"Say, I'd rather have him tell us how he did this trick with the figures," interrupted Harry. "Go on, Joe."

"Well, it's really very simple when you know how," said Joe. "You see the sum I made appear on the stone wasn't the sum of the numbers you three fellows wrote down."

"It wasn't?" cried Tom, surprised.

"No," went on Joe Strong, with a twinkle in his bright eyes. "I let Harry, Charlie and Henry each set down four figures on a piece of paper. Then I handed a piece of paper to Tom to add up the sum, only it didn't happen to be the same piece that you three fellows used," and Joe laughed.

"I just substituted one of my own," resumed the boy wizard. "I had it in my pocket all ready, for I thought maybe I'd get a chance to play this trick to-day. I wadded up in a little ball the paper with the figures you boys set down, and slipped Tom one of my own. Of course I knew what my numbers were going to add up to—I had put down the figures myself, so I ought to know. They were like this:"

4,004
2,821
3,642

Joe showed the little sum, rapidly scribbling it on another piece of paper.

"Those figures add up to ten thousand four hundred and sixty-seven," he resumed, "and of course I knew that before Tom announced the sum. And I knew I was safe in letting Tom have the list of figures I wrote, for he had not seen those you fellows had set down. I made my set of figures look as though a different person had set down each one, and Tom wasn't familiar enough with you boys' way of making figures to detect the change.

"Then, when I took the piece of paper from him, I burned that and with it the one that Charlie, Henry and Harry had written their figures on, so there wouldn't be any chance of being found out later."

"But how did you get the sum, ten thousand four hundred and sixty-seven, on the piece of stone?" asked Charlie. "You didn't touch that after you took the paper from Tom, I can vouch for that."

"No, I didn't touch it," affirmed Joe.

"Then how did the figures get on? There must have been some magic about that."

"It's very simple when you know how," laughed Joe. "When I was talking here to you fellows, I just put the sum, ten thousand four hundred and sixty-seven on the flat side of the stone with a pencil. Then I turned it over and left it lying on the ground until I wanted it. Then it was easy enough for me to pick it up, cover it with a handkerchief and hand it to Charlie to hold. The sum

was there on it all the while, and when Tom announced what my three figures added up to, a result that I, of course, knew beforehand, I simply had Charlie lift the handkerchief, and—there you were!"

For a moment there was silence among the boys. Then they burst out with:

"Well, I'll be jiggered!"

"As easy as that!"

"It's a wonder we didn't think of that!"

"Two papers—one with our numbers on, and one with his!"

"That's the whole secret," explained Joe. "That is, all but the stone. Of course if I had had a slate to use that would have been a little different."

"That's what I don't understand," observed Charlie. "That professor last night passed the slate around for inspection, and there wasn't any number written on it."

"Oh, yes there was," said Joe with a smile. "Only you didn't see it. It was a trick slate. On one side, covered by a piece of black stiff paper, which looked almost like the slate, was the number written in chalk—a number that was the sum of three figures previously known to the professor, and on the piece of paper he gave out to be added up.

"When he took back the slate, after having passed it around for inspection, he walked up on to

the stage and quietly slipped out the piece of black paper. That left the chalk sum exposed. He could either do that before he covered the slate with the handkerchief and gave it to some one to hold, or afterward, as he took it from the person and raised the handkerchief covering. In his case he did it before, since he let the person holding the slate lift the handkerchief."

"Then the number was there all the while!" cried Tom.

"Yes."

"And if the one who held the slate had lifted the handkerchief it would have been seen?"

"Yes. And for that reason it's safer to lay the slate on a table or on the stage in plain sight, but where no one can inspect it. Then the magician can ask some one to come up and lift the handkerchief, so it can't be said he wrote the number down himself. That's all there is to it."

"Say, it does sound easy now," commented Charlie. "But how did you ever figure it out, Joe?"

"Yes, you surely did the trick smoothly!" was Tom's compliment.

"Oh, I've studied it a little," admitted Joe, modestly. "It needs a little practice in 'palming,' that is in holding two or more things in your hand without letting the audience suspect you have them; or in changing one thing for another by sleight of

hand, as I changed the papers. You see it's very easy—like this."

He picked up a small stone, held it on the back of his left hand, passed his right quickly over it and closed both fists.

"In which hand is the stone now?" he asked.

"There," said Tom, indicating the right fist.

"No, there," said Charlie, quickly, touching the left.

"Neither one, it's there on Henry's knee," announced Joe with a laugh, and so it was, the same stone, for it was peculiarly marked.

"How did you do it?" cried Henry, in frank amazement.

"Oh, just by making the action of my hands quicker than your eyes," was the answer. "I made a couple of false motions, and you followed them with your eyes instead of watching the stone. That's how I managed to substitute the paper with my figures on for the one Tom thought you boys had prepared. It's very simple."

"Yes, to hear you tell it," came from Henry. "But say, Joe, how did the professor do that trick with the live rabbit? I was close to him when he came down off the platform, and I couldn't see where he had the bunny. And yet, in plain view, he pulled it out of somebody's inside coat pocket. How in the world did he do it?"

"It was easy—for him," Joe stated. "When he

finished the hat and egg trick he went behind the scenes for a second and slipped the live rabbit in a secret pocket in his coat.

"After some hocus-pocus work, and a lot of 'patter,' or talk made up to keep you from watching him too sharply, he went close to the man from whose pocket he was going to produce the rabbit. He held the lapel of the man's coat close against his own for a second, and with his other hand he reached in the secret pocket and got hold of the rabbit's ears. Then, when he lifted the bunny up, it looked just as if the animal came out of the man's pocket, but, all the while, it came from the professor's."

"Huh!" exclaimed Tom. "It all sounds very easy."

"It is, and again it isn't," explained Joe. "It takes lots of practice, and one's got to have his nerve with him all the while, to know how to act in case anything goes wrong."

"Then *you* ought to be a good wizard," declared Henry, "for you sure have nerve!"

"That's right," added Harry Martin. "But say now, Joe, in that trick where the professor took——"

Harry did not finish his sentence. His words were cut short by an explosion which came from a group of buildings located near a railroad siding about a quarter of a mile away. Following the

explosion a cloud of black smoke billowed up to the sky.

"Look, fellows!" cried Tom. "It's the fireworks factory!"

"It's on fire!" added Henry.

"It's blown up!" yelled Charlie.

"Come on, boys! Come on!" shouted Joe, and he led the way toward the cloud of smoke, which was now pierced here and there by darting tongues of fire. As the boys rushed onward there came other and smaller explosions, like the popping of guns.

CHAPTER III

TO THE RESCUE

For a few moments after the excitement caused by the explosion and fire, the five boys rushed on together, saying nothing. Their eyes were fixed on the distant group of burning buildings, which, being of light and flimsy construction (as is always the case with fireworks factories and powder mills), were burning rapidly. They occupied quite an extent of territory, being well separated so that if one blew up or caught fire there would be less likelihood of all being consumed.

"She sure is a hummer!" cried Harry, as he raced along beside Charlie Ford.

"That's right!" joined in the red-haired lad.

"The whole thing's likely to go up if the wind doesn't shift," commented Henry Blake. "It's blowing the flames right toward the main building now."

"Yes, and they're all pretty well filled," said Joe Strong. "This is their busy season, getting ready for the Fourth, you know. There'll likely be a lot more explosions, and a final big one."

"There goes one now!" cried Tom Simpson.

As he spoke there was a burst of flame and smoke from one of the buildings that had not before caught fire, and then followed an explosion louder than any of the previous ones.

"There she goes!" shouted Harry.

"And look at the rockets!" added Joe.

A sheaf of sky rockets, part of a shipment just finished, had become ignited and now were whizzing up in the air, bursting with loud reports far above the earth, for they were large-sized pyrotechnics.

"If this were only night it would be a grand sight!" murmured Charlie, narrowly missing a fall as he stumbled over a stone.

"Too bad they couldn't wait," commented Joe, grimly. "Say! I wonder if any one's hurt. It came so suddenly that a lot of the workers may be trapped in there."

"That's so," agreed his chums. They increased their pace. They could now see others running to the fire—men, boys, and some women and children, coming from the direction of the town. Others were leaving their work in fields, gardens, or in houses to view the unusual sight.

There was not a little alarm, too, for many of the men and some girls and boys of the town worked in the Universal Fireworks Factory, particularly at this season of the year.

The factory was located close to the freight station of the Bedford and Point Barrow Railroad, a spur, or short track, running in among the factory buildings. On the sidings were a number of freight cars, which carried big red signs, marked: "Dangerous! Explosive! Keep all lights away!"

But there was plenty of light now, even though the glaring sun took away the effect that would have prevailed had there been darkness—plenty of light and fire.

"She sure is a hummer!" cried Tom.

"A hum-dinger," added Harry. "Listen to that!"

Another explosion occurred, lifting a roof off one of the frail buildings, and depositing the blazing mass over on the railroad tracks, and rather dangerously near the passenger depot, which was not far from the freight station.

"There goes the fire alarm!" cried Harry.

"They'll be here in no time. It's a general alarm when anything like a fireworks factory goes up," said Joe. "There they come," he added, as he looked back toward the town, and pointed to an automobile fire-fighting apparatus coming along the road. The auto-engine was a new purchase for Bedford. Besides that, there was an old steamer, drawn by hand whenever horses could not be requisitioned in a hurry.

The five boys had to cross the small stream,

known locally as Bedford Creek, in order to reach the scene of the fire. As they rushed along across the fields toward the water, all but Joe bore off to the left. He kept straight on.

"Where you going?" asked Harry.

"To the fire, of course," was the answer.

"The bridge is over this way," stated Tom, indicating a white structure that crossed the stream some distance to the left of where the boys then were.

"Bridge!" cried Joe. "Do you think I'd waste time crossing a bridge when there's a fire like this straight ahead of me?"

"How are you going to get across the creek?" Harry queried.

"Wade or swim, of course. It's a hot day!"

And while Tom, Harry and the others ran on toward the bridge, Joe Strong, coming to the edge of the creek, which at this point was deeper and wider than at any other, waded out without a moment's hesitation.

For a moment his chums watched him, fascinated. Then they shook their heads, and kept on toward the bridge.

"He sure has got nerve!" asserted Henry.

"Yes, Joe's there with it every time," added Tom. "I wish I dared do that. But if I got wet with all my clothes on, I'd be in for a good scolding when I got home."

"Joe may be, too—or worse," said Charlie. "I hear that he and Deacon Blackford don't get along any too well of late. He's given Joe several touches of the whip and strap, and Joe's not a fellow to stand much of that sort of treatment."

"I wouldn't blame him for not standing it," commented Henry. "Deacon Blackford may mean all right, but we all know he's totally ashamed to have it known what Joe's father and mother were. As if it could be a disgrace to have had a mother who was a dandy circus rider, and a father who was a top-notcher when it came to magic. I'd be proud of it if my folks were that sort."

"So would I," added Harry.

"That's where Joe gets his nerve," remarked Tom. "Nerve to do just what he did now—swim the creek."

"Yes, and that's where he gets his liking for magic tricks and for his circus stunts," added Charlie. "He sure is a great boy, and strong. Why, say! you ought to have seen him on the trapeze I put up in our barn the other day. He did one giant swing and then he slid down a rope in a way that——"

"Look, there goes another building!" interrupted Henry, and the boys, racing for the bridge, forgot, for the time, to discuss Joe and his doings, in watching the progress of the fire, to which they were much nearer now. They could hear the

crackle of the flames and the popping of small pieces of fireworks.

Charlie turned back to look at Joe. The young wizard, for such he later became, had waded out until he found himself getting beyond his depth, then he plunged into the water, fully clothed as he was, and began to swim.

Joe was a good swimmer, and he had on a light summer suit and tennis shoes, so he was not as hampered as otherwise he might have been. But swimming in a full suit was nothing for Joe. He had done it before in a camping contest, and he had plunged in once, in midwinter, in a heavy suit, to rescue a little girl from the icy stream.

Joe was a wonderful swimmer, though he could not yet do any fancy tricks. He was just doing the plain Australian crawl stroke, which puts one through the water in wonderfully good time. On and on he swam, gaining the other side, and was very close to the fire before his companions had reached the bridge. That was where Joe's nerve and daring stood him in good stead.

In the beginning he had no particular object in getting to the fireworks fire in such a hurry. It was just curiosity on his part, as it was on the part of his companions. Then another thought came to Joe.

As he climbed up the bank on the other side,

water dripping from every part of him, the youth thought:

"I wouldn't be surprised but what somebody got hurt in this fire. It came so suddenly they can't all have escaped. It isn't going to be any easy job to put it out, either. They'll need all the help they can get together. There go some of the railroad men to give a hand."

Joe was out on level ground now, near the railroad tracks, and he utilized them as the shortest way to the fire. He looked back to see his chums who had crossed the bridge and were now laboriously racing onward. Their long run had tired them, whereas the swim Joe had taken had refreshed him, as the day was warm.

The shrill sound of the fire apparatus siren could now be heard, mingling with the whistle of the steamer, for the engineer, seeing the smoke and blaze from afar, and knowing the need, had started a fire under the boiler, ready for quick work when he should have reached the scene of the conflagration.

Joe joined the running, panting throng of men and boys that now came swarming from all directions to the fire. The crew of a freight train, drawn up at the Bedford station, had come over to do what they could, and the fire-fighting force of the factory itself was busy. They had a small steamer on the premises, and lines of hose were

connected to the steam pump in the boiler room. Water was soon being poured on the blaze, and when the auto-apparatus and the old-fashioned steamer arrived, they, too, were put into service.

By this time Joe's chums had joined him.

"You beat us to it," panted Charlie.

"Sure I did!" exclaimed Joe. "Why didn't you fellows take a chance in the creek?"

"We didn't want to spoil our clothes," said Charlie.

"That's right. It didn't improve mine any," admitted the young wizard, as he looked down at his sodden garments. "I expect dad will ask me to step out to the woodhouse when I get home," Joe said grimly. He called Mr. Blackford "dad," and, as a matter of fact, up to the time he was eight years old Joe had not appreciated the fact that "the deacon," as he was often called, was only his foster-parent. Joe had but a hazy idea of his real father and mother, and the change at his early age failed to impress him. Later he heard the real story, however.

"Yes, I guess I'll get a talking to, anyhow," he went on. "But I couldn't wait to come over the bridge. Say, she's going some! isn't she?"

"That's what!" commented Tom. "Look, there goes the big building!"

The main structure, which up to now had suffered neither from explosion nor from fire, was seen

to be smoking on one side. Hoarse orders came from the fire chief to play streams on that in an effort to save it, and the fire-fighters drew closer.

"Anybody hurt, did you hear?" asked Charlie of Joe.

"No, but some had narrow escapes. A few of the girls had to jump, but it wasn't far, for most of the buildings are only two stories high."

This was true of all, in fact, save the main structure, where most of the fireworks were stored. That was four stories high, and constructed partly of brick. It was an old mill turned into a fireworks factory, the other structures being built around it.

"If that main building catches—good-night! I'm going to leave this spot!" said Henry.

"Yes, it will be healthier a bit farther on," agreed Tom.

"Oh, look!" suddenly cried Harry. "There's a man on the top floor of the store-house! Look!"

He pointed. The others followed the direction of his outstretched finger. They saw a small door open near the roof of the main building. It was a door with a projecting beam above it—a beam such as in barns and mills is used for hoisting bags of grain or bales of hay. And, for the moment, a man stood outlined in this small, open door.

Then, suddenly, the man was seen to crumple up and fall in a heap on the very edge of the opening.

So close to the edge did he fall that there came a gasp of horror from the throng, for it looked for an instant as if he would topple out and fall to the ground below.

"Why—why, that's the professor—Professor Rosello, who did the magic tricks last night!" cried Harry.

"So it is!" agreed Tom. They had recognized him in that brief instant. What he was doing on the top floor of the main building of the fireworks factory could only be guessed then.

"If he hadn't fainted, or been overcome by smoke or flames, or whatever happened to him," said Henry, "he might have slid down the rope and been saved. As it is now, he's in danger."

A rope dangled from the beam above the door to the ground below. It ran through a pulley, and was evidently used to hoist and lower materials into and out of the factory.

Joe Strong, with an exclamation, suddenly darted forward toward the building, which, in spite of the streams of water poured against it, was now on fire.

"What are you going to do?" cried Harry, reaching out his hand to hold back his chum.

"Get that man—the professor!" answered Joe.

"But you—you can't do it!" protested Henry.

"Can't I? You just watch me!" cried Joe, as he broke into a run. He was headed straight for

the dangling rope that hung from the beam. It was right in front of the open door, where the motionless form of the magician lay.

Joe Strong was going to the rescue.

CHAPTER IV

JOE'S FEAT

THERE was so much going on—firemen and eager volunteers working at the hose and apparatus, railroad men and factory employees endeavoring to get out of the danger zone a car loaded with explosives, others removing from the factory and store-houses some of the powder, still others rushing here and there, uselessly shouting—there was so much of this sort of thing going on that, for a moment, no one noticed Joe Strong except his four chums.

But the lad had no sooner reached the foot of the dangling rope than others saw him, among them some firemen.

"Come back from there!" they shouted.

"Not just yet!" coolly answered Joe.

"What are you going to do?" a railroad man inquired.

"Get him!" replied Joe, briefly, as he pointed to the huddled figure lying in the low doorway up above.

"You can't do it! That place is all on fire inside. It may go up any minute."

"Well, I figure that I've got a minute to spare, and a minute is about all I want," answered Joe calmly.

By this time he was going up the rope hand over hand, not an easy feat, but Joe seemed to make nothing of it. Now, if ever, he blessed the time he had spent in acrobatic work, in emulating the tricks of circus performers, his own mother included. Now, if ever, he was glad of his strong and supple muscles, his cool head and eyes that never faltered.

Up and up he went, hand over hand, climbing the rope like a veritable monkey, and with a skill that would have caused applause to break forth at any other than this critical time. As it was, there was a murmur of admiration for Joe's coolness and daring. For it was a daring feat.

All this while the fighting of the fire was going on at other parts of the plant. There had been no loud explosions for some time, though small ones were constantly to be heard. And inside the factory's flimsy buildings, most of which were in flames, could be heard the hissing and spluttering of various forms of pyrotechnics.

Up and up went Joe until in a very short time he swung in through the small door, and stood beside the prostrate man, whom some of the boys had recognized as Peter Crabb, otherwise known as Professor Rosello, the magician.

"He's there!" cried Charlie Ford.

"Yes, Joe'll get him down if there's any way to do it!" chimed in Henry Blake.

"And if there isn't a way, Joe will make one!" declared Tom Simpson.

Joe's chums and others in the crowd could see the young wizard now bending over the huddled form of the professor. They saw Joe hauling up the rope to get at the free end which was on the ground.

Just then came a burst of flames and smoke from a window in the second story, directly past which Joe had climbed a moment before, and past which he must lower the unconscious form of the magician; for that, evidently, was his intention. Could it be done?

"He'll never do it!" some one said.

"They're both goners!" was the general comment.

"The place is all on fire inside. No chance to save it," a fireman remarked. "We'd all better get back, for she'll explode soon."

"Come on down, Joe!" a voice cried. "Save yourself!"

Joe answered something. What it was no one could hear above the crackle of the flames and the puffing of the engines.

"Joe won't come down without him," said Henry Blake in a low voice.

"That's what he won't," agreed Harry Martin.

But how was Joe to lower the man past that outburst of flame? Even a momentary passage through it would likely cause death if the man inhaled the fire. At best, he would be terribly burned.

But Joe Strong knew what he was doing. As the crowd watched, they saw him take off his soaking-wet coat and trousers, wet from his swim across the creek. In another instant Joe had wrapped and twisted the sodden garments around the form of the magician, covering his head and face.

It was then the work of but an instant for Joe to fasten the rope about Professor Rosello. Joe was an expert in tying knots, and soon he swung the form, encased in wet garments, free of the window ledge. Down he lowered the man, swiftly, right through the outburst of flame. The rope was charred but not burned through.

"I knew Joe'd think of a way!" shouted Tom.

"But how's he going to get down himself?" gasped Harry. "He can never do it!"

This was a puzzling question for his chum. Joe seemed doomed. But the lad himself never seemed to give this a thought. He stood in the open, upper doorway, attired in only his wet undergarments.

The flames, spurting out from the window below him, seemed fiercer than ever. The rope would

never stand another trip past them. And now a series of small explosions in the building on the upper floor of which Joe stood indicated that that building soon would go in a burst of fire and smoke.

But Joe knew there was a life net carried on the auto fire engine, and he depended on this.

The chief of the Bedford department had not lost his head, and Joe had no sooner lowered the form of the magician to the ground when the quick mind of the chief was directed to saving the boy.

"Bring up that life net!" he shouted through his trumpet. It had been made ready some time before, but had not been used, since most of the employees had been rescued from the first floors.

"Stand here with it!" directed the chief, indicating a spot out in front of, and directly in line with, the open doorway in which Joe still stood. Now the smoke was swirling more thickly about the lad, and back of him could be seen dancing tongues of fire.

"Can you jump it, Joe?" called the chief through his trumpet.

"All right! Hold her steady! I'm coming!" cried Joe, shrilly, above the crackle of the flames.

A fire department life net consists of a big iron ring, which can be folded in half upon itself. Around the circumference of the ring is woven a strong rope net, sagging toward the middle. Firemen stand in a circle about the iron ring, grasp-

ing it with their hands, and holding it as high as possible to allow for the recoiling impact of the falling body.

"Are you ready down there?" cried Joe.

"All ready!" answered the chief. "Brace yourselves now, men!"

Joe poised for an instant on the edge of the doorway. It was a sixty-foot jump, but he hesitated only an instant. With his hands to his sides, standing as straight as an arrow, his superb form beautifully outlined, clad as he was only in his underclothes, Joe jumped.

Straight as a plummet he came down, feet first, into the life net. It sagged with his weight, and the men holding it were jerked forward, but there were so many of them that the elasticity of the apparatus was preserved, and Joe bounced up like a rubber ball.

Another bounce and he turned a somersault, landing on the turf at one side.

A cheer went up from the rescuers. Joe had been saved, and he had saved the life of the magician in a thrilling manner. Another cheer rang out. But there was no time for more. There was still the fire to fight.

Joe's chums gathered about him, eager to clasp his hand, to clap him on the back, to utter words of praise. But he had but one thought—or, rather, two.

"Is the professor all right?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes," some one answered. "He'd only fainted. He's all right now, and not burned a bit, thanks to your wet clothes."

"Where are my clothes?" demanded Joe. "This isn't exactly a bathing beach."

"You can't wear your things," a fireman informed our hero. "They're badly scorched. Here, wrap yourself in this blanket until you can get home," and he extended one of the horse-coverings. Joe accepted it gratefully.

"Better get back from here," another fireman advised. "This place is going, and it's full of powder."

The crowd, as well as Joe and his chums, took the hint.

But the main factory did not go up. The firefighters rallied in force around it, seeing that the other buildings were doomed, and the bigger part of the plant was saved. Luckily enough, too, as had it exploded the force would have been felt a long distance. The light and flimsy buildings burned quickly into ashes, and the explosions of fireworks grew less frequent. The material in the main building was spoiled by water, but that was better than having the fire reach it.

Little remained to do now, but to guard against stray sparks in the building that had been saved at such risk. The crowd began to disperse.

"Where's the professor?" asked Joe, moving about in his blanket like some pale-faced Indian.

"They took him to the hotel," said Tom. "Say, Joe, don't you want to stop at our house and get some of my clothes? It's nearer than going to yours."

"Good idea. Thanks. I guess I will. I don't feel exactly like showing up at home in this rig."

Some one who knew Joe offered to drive him in his automobile to the Simpson house. Tom, of course, went with his friend, and Joe was soon clothed in ordinary garments, having first taken a bath at Tom's house, for the smoke had made him black and grimy.

CHAPTER V

JOE'S AMBITION

"WHERE are you going now, Joe?" asked Tom, as his chum, after having thanked Mrs. Simpson for her hospitality, stood, ready to leave the house. "Going home?"

"Not right away," Joe answered. "I had an idea I'd like to call on the professor to see if he was all right. It isn't every day I help rescue a man that way, you know."

"Help rescue him!" exclaimed Tom, with an accent on the first word. "Why, you did it all, Joe! And, say, I never saw anything done slicker. Using your wet clothes was just the thing."

"It was the *only* thing," said Joe. "I knew the fire wouldn't get through my soaking wet coat and trousers in the little while he was exposed to the flames. But say, Tom, are my clothes too badly burned to wear?"

"I'm afraid so, Joe. I had a look at them, and they seem to be ruined."

"Too bad!" and Joe sighed. Mr. Amos Blackford had the reputation in town of being rather

close, and Joe realized this better than any one else.

"The professor ought to get you a new suit," Tom asserted, "since you ruined yours saving him."

"Oh, that wasn't the reason I wanted to see him," hastily interposed the young wizard. "And if you go with me, Tom, don't you dare mention my burned clothes."

Joe looked so stern as he said this, and Tom so well knew the firmness of his chum, that he readily promised to do as Joe wished.

"I think I'll just give him a call at the hotel," Joe went on. "There's time enough for me to go home—and take what's coming to me—later," he added grimly. "I've got another suit, Tom, my best one. I can put that on and give you back yours."

"Oh, I'm not worrying about that, Joe. But come on, we'll go to the hotel. I wonder what the professor was doing up on the top floor of that fireworks factory, anyhow."

"That's one of the things that's been puzzling me, Tom. And I don't mind admitting that it is one of the reasons why I'd like to meet that prestidigitator."

"Come along then," went on Tom. "I'm with you. You may learn some more of his tricks, Joe."

"Oh, I know quite a few already."

"You do? You never told us fellows."

"Oh, well, I sort of had to keep them under cover. You know my foster-parents aren't any too proud of what my father and mother did for a living."

"So I've heard, Joe."

"But I'm proud of them!" Joe exclaimed, with flashing eyes. "I wish I could be such a rider as I've heard my mother was, and as good a magician as my father. But, as I said, I've had to sort of keep my ambitions under cover.

"I have done a little practicing on the side, though, and I have some books on magic I'm studying. There's more to it than most persons suppose. No, I don't want to get to the bottom of any of Professor Rosello's tricks. I fancy I know most of them anyhow. But I would like to know what he was doing in that factory, especially up where he was when the fire broke out."

"Maybe he'll tell us," said Tom.

As the two young men went through the town the signs of excitement about the fire were still pretty much in evidence. On all street corners little groups were talking about it. Several persons had been overcome with smoke, and one or two employees were slightly burned, one man seriously, it was feared.

As Joe walked along he and Tom heard more

than once a murmur of voices, which could be heard commenting on Joe's brave act.

"There he goes now!" some one exclaimed. "The nerviest fellow in seven counties! I don't believe there's a thing Joe Strong doesn't dare do!"

"You're getting famous, Joe," commented his chum.

Joe smiled, but said nothing.

They soon found themselves at the one hotel of Bedford, and, after stating their errand, a bell-boy came back with the information that Professor Rosello would see them in his room.

"He's a little knocked out," the clerk informed Joe. "Nothing serious, though. He'll be glad to see you."

And the professor was. He looked from Joe to Tom as the two lads entered his room.

"To whom am I indebted so greatly for the saving of my life?" asked Professor Rosello, in a rather formal and old-fashioned manner, which well became him.

"He did it!" said Tom, quickly, indicating Joe.

"Then permit me, my dear young sir, to give you my most heartfelt and sincere thanks." He shook hands gravely with Joe, and resumed: "I am well aware that mere words are futile at a time like this, and so I will refrain from uttering many of them. But, none the less, I do thank you. I did not realize my danger until after I had been rescued.

Then I was told it was you who had done it. Even yet I hardly realize what I went through and my escape from a great danger. I dare say it will come to me as a shock, later."

"I hope you're feeling better," said Joe, who was anxious to get the "thanking business," as he called it, over with.

"Yes, I am almost myself again, thank you," was the reply. "I did swallow a little smoke, but not much. I really had no business to go where I did. You see it was this way."

Tom looked at Joe, as much as to say:

"Now you'll get your explanation all right."

"I am, as perhaps you know, a sleight-of-hand performer; a magician, as we are sometimes called. I gave an exhibition in your town last night."

"I was there, and liked it first rate!" broke in Tom. "And Joe here—he showed us——"

Tom stopped suddenly, for Joe administered an unseen, but none the less swift, warning kick, under cover of a table.

"I am glad you liked my little entertainment," the professor went on, not appearing to notice the little side-play between Joe and his chum, if, indeed, he saw it. "As I was saying, I am a modern magician. As you young gentlemen probably know, we are always on the lookout for new tricks, new effects, illusions and so on. Perhaps I need not tell you that there is really no so-called Black

Art—nothing really supernatural in my work, or in that of my fellow artists. We can not overcome nature, we merely adapt her to our needs. The old truth of the hand being quicker than the eye still holds good. In fact it is very easy to deceive the eye, as you doubtless noticed at my little entertainment. You see——"

The professor pulled a red handkerchief from his pocket, flourished it in the air, stuffed it into his clenched fist. Pulled out one end to disclose a blue flag. Then, with a rapid motion, he stuffed it back into his clenched fist again, to bring it out pure white, and a moment later, rolling it up into a ball, he smoothed it out to disclose a miniature United States flag.

This he held out to Tom, who, when he took it, found that he was grasping a lemon.

"Why—what—how did you——?" he stammered.

"Merely demonstrating that the hand is quicker than the eye," said the professor, smiling.

"Joe can do——" began Tom, when he was again stopped by a swift kick under the table.

"As I said," resumed the magician, with a smile, "I am always on the lookout for new effects. This morning, when I was waiting for my train at the station to take me and my effects on to the next town, where I show night after to-morrow, I noticed the fireworks factory. It occurred to me that I

might use some simple little piece of fireworks in demonstrating one of my tricks, so, as I had time enough, I went over to the office.

"They had just what I wanted, and the manager took me up to the store room to show me different styles of it. While we were on the second floor there was an explosion in one of the distant buildings. The manager rushed away at once, leaving me there in the factory.

"I realized that the fire was somewhere near me, but I had no idea that it might spread to the building in which I then was. Left to myself, I strolled about, looking at the different pieces of fireworks. I was very much interested. I even went up to the top story, all alone. Those in the factory must have rushed out at the first alarm.

"I realized that there was a fire, but I fairly lost myself in working out the details of a new illusion that came to me while in the factory. I sat down amid the store of pyrotechnics and became involved in thought. Then, before I knew it, I was trapped. I rushed to the opening and must have fainted. The rest you young gentlemen know better than I."

Joe had received the information he wanted. The explanation was a perfectly natural one. Perhaps, though, no one but a man like Professor Rosello would have sat down in a fireworks factory, with a blaze near him, to work out the details of a trick. But, as he said, he fairly lost himself in a maze

of thought, and when he did realize his danger it was almost too late.

"And now, once more, permit me to thank you for saving my life. I can offer you no adequate reward, nor, I imagine, do you want one, Joe Strong."

Joe shook his head negatively.

"But if ever you are in need of a friend—that is such a friend, with such limited talents as I possess—don't fail to call on Peter Crabb, otherwise known as Professor Rosello," he added earnestly. "I am going to travel on to-night," he resumed. "I shall feel well enough then. I can not get the fireworks I desired, but they will do later.

"As I said, if ever you want a friend, don't forget me. I may not be able to do much for you, but such as I can do, I will do gladly. I know many men and women in such lines of public life as I, myself, follow, and it may be I can help you to gratify some ambition."

"I wonder if you could?" asked Joe, boldly. "I have only one ambition—that is at present—and that is to be what you are."

"A magician?" cried Professor Rosello, somewhat surprised.

"Yes," answered Joe.

The professor was silent a moment.

"Young man," he said, "it is not an easy life. There are many hardships, and not every one can

stand them, nor is every one fitted to attempt to amuse the public as I do. I say that in all modesty, but there is a certain manual dexterity required, a certain quickness of motion—of the eye—a certain amount of nerve——"

"Joe's got that!" cried Tom, moving away to escape an expected kick. "And he can do some tricks, too. You ought to see him do the number trick you worked last night!"

The professor looked strangely at Joe.

"You are, perhaps, an amateur?" he asked, slowly.

"Sort of," admitted Joe, diffidently.

"Then perhaps you can master the art, after many years' practice. If you like, I will test you. Let me see——"

"My father was Professor Morretti," said Joe in a low voice.

The magician started.

"Professor Morretti!" he murmured. "Are you his son?"

"Yes," said Joe, simply.

Professor Rosello bowed as to an equal.

"My dear young man," he said, "I am greatly interested in you—more so than before. If you are the true son of Professor Morretti, and if you have even a small part of his talents, I can predict for you a brilliant future. He was one of the greatest of us. I never met him, but it was some-

thing even to know him by reputation. I am indeed glad to meet his son—proud to have been saved by him.

"And to think I talked to you of years of preparation—that I had an idea of showing you a few simple tricks, just to discourage you! For I did not want you to learn by too bitter experience the sorrow of failure. And you are Professor Morretti's son! I am proud to know you!"

CHAPTER VI

A FAMILY JAR

THE meeting between Joe Strong and the magician had quite a different result from the one our young wizard had expected. He had not been sure that his father would be known, even by reputation, to Professor Rosello, and it was a source of pride and joy to Joe to see the esteem in which his parent was held.

"There was no more brilliant performer in the business," said the magician. "His box trick is unrivalled to-day, and his mystery of the ringing bells, while it is done by several, including myself, lacks the brilliancy and smoothness which he gave it. I wish I had known him, but, failing in that, I am glad to know his son."

"And I am glad to know you," replied Joe. "It isn't often I meet any one who appreciates the profession of a magician, or of a circus rider. My mother was that, you know."

"So I have heard. She, too, was famous in her day. So you are an orphan. May I inquire with whom you live?"

Joe gave the details of his bringing up by his foster-parents. Professor Rosello was much interested, and asked many questions.

"Are you serious in wishing to adopt the profession, or calling, of a prestidigitator?" he asked.

"I certainly am!" answered Joe. "But I know Mr. and Mrs. Blackford will object to it. They are even ashamed to have folks know what my father and mother were."

"A foolish pride!" murmured the professor. "There are as fine and noble men and women in the circus, or in any theatrical line, as in any other calling of life. It is hard that such a prejudice exists against them. I have met it myself.

"But, Joe—I am going to call you that, for I feel as if I had known you a long time. Joe, you realize, perhaps, that you will have to begin at the bottom of the ladder in this?"

"Yes," Joe answered the question eagerly. "Oh, I don't suppose I could start in now. I've got to work up to it gradually. It's just my ambition, that's all."

"Well, I hope you succeed," said the magician. "I wish I could help you. Perhaps I can, later. I will give you my card, with the names of the places where I shall be playing for the next month or two. If you find that you can begin this life, let me know, and I may find an opening for you with some of my friends."

"Oh, I don't imagine I can," and Joe spoke hopelessly.

"Let me see your hands," said the professor suddenly.

Joe held them out. Firm, muscular hands they were, well formed, and giving an idea of great strength.

"Good!" murmured the magician. "Here, let me see you palm this," and from an unseen portion of his clothing he produced a billiard ball.

Joe, nothing abashed, at once proceeded to manipulate the ball. He first exhibited it in one hand, and then in the other. Finally, showing both hands empty, he reached over and seemingly took the ball from off Tom's head!

"Bravo! Very good! Much better than I expected!" cried the professor. "You have a natural ability to palm articles. I presume you must have practiced, also."

"A little," admitted Joe. He did not state that many and many a night, in his room, he had gone through this and other necessary fundamentals in the magical art, getting ready for the time when he hoped his ambition should be realized. Now he was reaping the fruits of his secret practice.

"Yes, you are a better palmer than many who are on the stage to-day," said the professor. "It would not be fair to you, though, to say that you have not yet something to learn. But I can see you

have great promise. I sincerely hope I can assist you. I will now write out my different addresses for you. It may be that, some day, I can help you."

The professor sat down at a table, and began making out a list of towns where he would play in rotation.

Just here it may be stated for the benefit of readers unacquainted with the prestidigitator's art, that "palming," as it is known in the profession, is the act of holding an egg, billiard ball, lemon, coin, or some similar object, in the palm of the hand, by a slight contraction of the ball of the thumb, in such a manner that the hand, when the back of it is held out in front of an audience, appears perfectly empty. Passing of articles from one hand to another, involves palming, as does causing to "disappear" certain articles apparently taken from a person's hat, clothes and so on.

Palming is the basis of many tricks. The explanation of these tricks is very simple, involving in most cases the exercise of but three principles—palming, the use of special and secret apparatus, and the old trick of deceiving the eye by making certain motions with the hands.

The professor talked for some little time longer with Joe and Tom, and did some tricks there, in the hotel room, with simple articles, that even Joe admitted afterward he could not explain.

"But I'll soon learn how they're done," he said to Tom, as they came away. "I'm not going to be stumped by them!"

"Then your're going to keep at this ambition of yours, Joe?"

"I certainly am! I guess it's in my blood, Tom."

"I wouldn't be surprised."

Professor Rosello had again expressed his profound gratitude to Joe for saving his life. The magician had almost fully recovered from the shock and said he would go on that night to the next town where he would, later, give a performance. Joe left with a list of the succeeding places where Professor Rosello would "play."

"And now I guess I'd better get home," said Joe to Tom. "The folks may be worried about me, after hearing about the fire. I'll send your suit back as soon as I can."

"No hurry about that, Joe."

On the way to the residence of his foster-parents Joe heard more talk of the fire, and his own brave act was often mentioned. How the fire started was not known, but the conjecture was that spontaneous combustion was the cause. Fires in factories where Fourth of July articles are made are not rare occurrences. As a matter of fact, they are rather to be expected.

In this case, the saving of the main building prevented what might have been a calamity with

great loss of life. Most of the fire apparatus was returning as Joe turned down the street where he made his home with Mr. and Mrs. Blackford.

"I wonder if he'll raise a row about my clothes," thought Joe. To himself he always thought of Mr. Blackford as "he" and Mrs. Blackford as "she," though in conversation with others Joe called them "dad" and "mother."

As has been mentioned before, Mr. and Mrs. Blackford did not intend to be unkind. They had lived hard and strict lives when they were young, and they did not see why others should not tread the same path. In consequence they curtailed Joe's pleasures, they frowned at every mention of his parents, and they were, at times, actually harsh and cruel to him. They excused themselves on the plea that it was "for his good." But, undoubtedly, they were very short-sighted.

Joe would have been much better off had he had kinder treatment and greater liberty. In fact, at times, he was treated as a child, though he was, at the opening of this story, nearly eighteen years old.

"Yes, I reckon I'm in for a wigging," mused Joe, as he approached the house. "Might as well get it over with."

He vaulted over the gate, landing easily, though it was not a low barrier by any means.

"Oh, Joe! Don't do that!" cried Mrs. Black-

ford. She had seen him from the window. "You might spoil your shoes!"

"Oh, I guess not," he answered easily.

"And what has happened to you?" she went on. "That isn't your suit! Where have you been? Did you hear about the fire?"

"Yes. I was there. It was quite a blaze."

"And what about your suit?" went on the elderly woman. "This isn't yours."

"I know it."

"Whose is it?"

"Tom Simpson's. He lent it to me."

"But where's your own?"

"Burned."

"Burned?" Mrs. Blackford's voice was shrill.

"Yes. At the fire. I—er—well, I helped get a man out, and my suit was scorched. I had to borrow Tom's to wear home. Couldn't wear mine."

Mrs. Blackford raised her hands in surprise, and pushed her spectacles to the top of her head in order better to look at Joe.

"Well, of all things!" she cried. "I never heard tell of such goings on! The very idea!"

"What's the matter? What has happened?" asked the rather harsh voice of Deacon Blackford, as he came up the walk on his way home from the office of his feed and grain business. "Has that boy been doing something again?" he asked.

"Doing something! I should say he had!" cried

Mrs. Blackford. "He's got his good suit burned up at the fire!"

"What?" cried the deacon.

"I couldn't help it," said Joe, in self-defense. "I had to save that man. It was the only way."

Then Joe told briefly and modestly what he had done. He did not bring out his true worth in the matter of the rescue, and he hardly made it plain that, had it not been for his soaking wet suit, Professor Rosello might have been fatally burned.

"Professor Rosello?" queried Mr. Blackford. "Is he a school teacher, Joe?"

"No, sir, he's a professor of magic."

"Magic! You mean one of those worthless characters who go about giving silly exhibitions, like the one that was here last night?"

"Yes, he was the one I saved," Joe answered. "I'm sorry about my suit, but it couldn't be helped."

"The idea!" cried Mrs. Blackford.

Mr. Blackford looked stern.

"A low, public performer!" he murmured. "Was there no one else to save him—no one who is paid to do such things—firemen with suits that would not easily burn? Could not one of them save him?"

"There wasn't time," Joe answered. "I just ran in, climbed up the rope, and lowered him down, after I tied my wet suit about him."

"How did you get your suit wet?" the deacon questioned.

"Swimming the creek."

"Swimming the creek! Why did you do that?"

"To get to the fire quicker. I didn't want to wait to go around over the bridge."

"Humph!"

Deacon Blackford fairly grunted out the word. He looked sharply at Joe.

"Well, I must say," he exclaimed sharply, "that you have made a pretty exhibition of yourself! The idea of first spoiling a suit of clothes by swimming the creek, and then burning it up!"

"And he had worn that suit only a little over two years!" put in Mrs. Blackford. "It was his second best. Oh, what a wasteful and careless boy you are! It's a shame!"

"That's what I say!" thundered the deacon. "And, what's more, you'll suffer for this, Joe! You have some money saved up. I shall take this to pay for the suit you ruined."

"I didn't ruin it!" Joe retorted, desperately enough. "I had to save the man's life. It was the only way!"

"Stuff and nonsense!" snapped the deacon.

"No nonsense at all!" cried Joe, his temper now thoroughly aroused. "I just had to do it!"

"Don't talk back to me!" cried his foster-father. "I'll teach you not to be impudent to me!" He drew back his hand as though to strike Joe, but the latter, after an involuntary closing of his fist,

stepped back out of the way. Joe's face was pale.

"I'll not take a blow from you, sir. Not any more," he said in a quiet voice.

"You won't, eh?" stormed the deacon. "We'll see what you'll take and won't take! You'll pay for that suit, that's sure! And we'll see who's boss here! I'll strike you if I like! You're not of age yet! Now go to your room. I don't want to act hastily. Go to your room at once, before I get angry," and, with a stamp of his foot, the old man raised a stern hand and pointed to the stairway.

Joe turned aside without a word.

CHAPTER VII

MR. BLACKFORD'S TROUBLE

BITTER at heart was Joe Strong as he walked slowly into his room and shut the door. This was a common form of punishment with the deacon, since he had given up his frequent whippings of Joe.

Just what effect the old man thought it had on the youth to send him to his room it is hard to tell. But Joe had often been sent there to sit in loneliness, often without a meal, or at best with bread and water. At times the deacon declared bread and water was all Joe could have, but Mrs. Blackford had a kinder heart, and she would butter the slices she brought up to Joe.

"Well, I had the row all right," mused Joe, as he sat down in the chair near a window. "It was just as I expected. As if I could help getting my suit scorched!"

From his window Joe could look across the fields to the fireworks factory, now mostly a heap of ruins. He thought of the professor he had saved, and he also thought of what Mr. Crabb had said of Joe's father and mother.

"If you were only alive now," thought Joe, with a sigh, "things would be different. I'd be with you in the circus, and what great times we'd have together!"

With shining eyes, in which there was a small trace of tears, Joe gazed off into the distance. He realized that his feelings were getting the best of him.

"Come, come, old man!" he told himself. "This won't do! Not at all! Not for a minute! You've got to brace up!"

He arose, raised his arms, and, taking off his coat, began to go through some simple gymnastic exercises. Even under his shirt one could see the ripple and play of his superb muscles. Joe was not the sort of athlete that develops into a "strong man." He was more of the all-around type, though he did possess unusual strength for a youth of his age. He could use it to advantage, too. The trapeze was his favorite, though he could do some startling feats on the flying rings and the horizontal bars.

"There, I feel better!" Joe announced, as he sat down, breathing a little faster because of the rapid exercise he had taken. "But I do wish I had a regular gym. I could work myself up in better shape. But what's the use of wishing."

He could hear, from downstairs, the murmur of the voices of his foster-father and mother.

"Talking about me, I suppose," mused Joe. "Trying to decide what punishment to inflict. Well, I know one thing, and that is if he tries to give me a whipping I won't stand it! No, sir! That's the limit! He scolded me enough, and he humiliates me by sending me up here, as if I were some five-year-old child. But that's as far as I'll let him go! He shan't beat me!

"If he does—if he does, I'll——"

Joe paused in his thinking. Again his gaze wandered off toward the burned factory, and again he saw, in fancy, the huddled form of the magician. "That's what I'll do!" exclaimed Joe, this time half aloud. "I won't wait for him to give me a beating, which I think he's planning to do. No, sir, I won't wait for that. I'm glad I thought of it. It's about the only thing left for me to do. I've about reached the limit."

Joe went to his closet and took out a suit of clothes. It was his "best," kept for Sundays and special occasions. Then he went to his bureau and began to look among the drawers.

"The only thing is about getting this suit back to Tom," mused Joe. "I'll have to do that. If I left it here they might not give it to him."

He paused to listen once more to the murmur of voices below him. The deacon's dull and rumbly and his wife's shriller.

"Still at it!" said Joe grimly.

From a far and dark corner of the closet Joe brought out an old valise. It had not often been used, for Joe seldom traveled. Deacon Blackford had no money to waste on such "foolishness."

"That'll hold about all I'll want to take with me," Joe mused. "Now, the next question is, can I get out of here without their suspecting? Of course, I'll have to do it after dark."

Joe went to a window and looked out. What he saw satisfied him.

"I wouldn't be much of a climber if I couldn't get down that," he murmured with a smile.

"It isn't as if this were the first trouble we'd had," mused Joe, "nor the first time he'd punished me unjustly."

Joe spoke the truth. Though doing what he thought was the best for his foster-son, Mr. Blackford was a harsh man. And he did not seem to realize that Joe was growing up. He made no allowances for that.

"I'm going to quit," Joe told himself. "I'm going to light out. I haven't much money," and he looked at the sum in a box that, since he was a little fellow, had served him as a "bank."

"It won't take me far," Joe mused. "I can't travel in a Pullman car, that's sure. That is, not one of the regular ones. A side-door Pullman for mine!" and Joe smiled as he thought of the tramp's designation of a freight car.

"And after I quit here—well, I guess I can find something to do. I ought to be able to make my living."

Joe laid out his money, and then, rather idly, he began palming coins, doing various tricks with them, sending them spinning up in the air seemingly to vanish.

"A little out of order," Joe said, as he missed one trick. "I'll have to practice."

As Joe put the money in his pocket his fingers came in contact with a paper. He drew it out. It was the list of towns where Professor Rosello would play.

"That's what I'll do," decided the young wizard. "I'll go to him. He said he'd help me if he could. I don't imagine he is very rich, but he's good. And if he can't give me anything else he can advise me. I need that, I'm thinking."

It was now late afternoon, almost time for supper, and Joe wondered whether he would get anything to eat.

"I'll go whether I do or not," he said. "I can buy something after I'm away from here, for I sure am going."

He could not hear his foster-parents talking now, and he wondered whether his fate had been decided on. In such case the deacon might come upstairs with the whip he occasionally used on Joe.

"If he comes I won't let him in," thought our

hero, as he locked his room door. "He'll have to break that down to get me, and I don't believe he'll do it—cost him too much for repairs. As soon as it's dark enough, I'll slip out the window. No, I guess I'd better wait until they're in bed and asleep. No use taking chances, and I've got plenty of time. I'll wait until about midnight."

Joe went on with his preparations for leaving home. He had no regrets, for, after all, it had not been much of a home of late.

"If only my father and mother were alive!" Joe said softly. "It sure would be great to travel around the country with them. My father could show me all his new tricks, and my mother would teach me more about horses. But there's no use wishing."

As Joe stood looking out through the window he saw Deacon Blackford pass, walking down the street in the direction of the feed and grain store which he owned.

"That's queer," mused Joe. "I wonder what he's going back to the store for at this hour. He never does that so near supper time. He must have forgotten something. Or maybe he's got something new in his head about me. I wonder what he's going back for?"

Joe might have wondered still more could he have looked into the feed store a little later. For Deacon Blackford was in close consultation with

two men—in such close consultation that it was necessary to shut and lock the office door.

"Well, you've come back, I see," remarked one of the men. He had shifty eyes that did not gaze straight at the person with whom he was talking.

"Yes, Denton, I've come back, as I said I would," replied Mr. Blackford. "But I tell you now, it's no use! I'm not going to give up another cent."

"Will you give us the papers then?" asked the man called Denton. He seemed to be pleading, rather than demanding.

"Give us the papers," he went on. "We can get a little back from the investment then. We won't lose it all. If you won't give us the money give us the papers."

"He'll give us both, Burke, that's what he'll give us!" broke in the other man. This man had a hard face, and his eyes, unlike those of his companion, met his opponent's boldly. But they did not have a pleasant or safe look—those eyes. "He'll give us both, that's what he'll give us!" said this man again. "If he doesn't he'll suffer for it!" and he banged his fist down on the deacon's desk.

"Oh, go easy now, Harrison, advised Burke Denton. "Go a bit easy."

"No, that's not my way!" exclaimed Jake Harrison. "What I want I'll get, if I have to take it out of his hide. He went into this investment with us and——"

"But you said it would be successful, and that we'd all make money," whined the deacon. "I didn't think I'd lose."

"I told you it wasn't a dead sure thing," said Harrison. "You knew it was a risk when you went into it. Now we're in a hole, and you will have to help us out."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then you'll be in more trouble. What we want is money enough to tide us over, or else those papers, so we can use 'em to raise money on from some one else. Come now, you've got the money and we know it. We're going to have it, too!" And again Harrison banged his fist down on the desk, so that Mr. Blackford jumped.

There was a worried look on his face as he looked at the two men—one shifty, and inclined to temporize, merely through fear of getting into too-deep water, the other a bolder and more hardened character, it seemed.

"Come, what do you say?" asked Harrison. "The papers or the money?"

CHAPTER VIII

THE RUNAWAY

DEACON BLACKFORD did not answer at once. He remained in his seat at his desk, looking first at one man and then at the other. Often his fingers would beat a drumming tattoo on the top of the desk, as though he were too nervous to keep still.

"Well!" said Harrison, sharply, "what's it to be? We can't wait all night!"

"Oh, we might give him a little more time," suggested Denton. "I know what it is——"

"You keep still!" fiercely interrupted Harrison. "I know what I'm talking about! We've given him too much time as it is. We need the papers or the money, and we're going to get what we want!"

"Well, I s'pose it'll have to be as you say," weakly agreed the other.

"That's what it will!" was the prompt comment. "Come now, Blackford, settle up with us about this investment business. What's it to be--the papers or the money?"

"Neither one!" said the deacon sharply. "I won't give you any more money. And if you think

I'm going to give up the valuable papers, which represent the only claim I have on you, you're very much mistaken. You'll get neither, and that's my last word!"

This time he banged his fist down on the desk with a sudden energy that seemed to surprise even Harrison. An ugly look came over the face of the hardened man. He half closed his bold eyes and leaned forward toward the deacon, craning his neck forward like some big snake about to strike its victim.

"So that's your answer, is it?" he asked.

"That's what it is!" declared Joe's foster-father. "You'll get neither the money nor the papers!"

"Oh, come now," began Denton, in rather pleading tones. "You'd better think again, Deacon. Take a little more time, and——"

"I've had all the time I want," said Mr. Blackford. "That's my last answer—neither the money nor the papers!"

"Well now, if I were you——" began Denton, when Harrison stopped him with a fierce gesture.

"That's enough," he cried. "If that's his last word, it's ours, too. Come on, Denton."

He arose as if to leave.

"But I thought we were going to get——"

"Oh, we'll get what we want, all right!" broke in Harrison.

"Not from me, you won't!" declared the deacon.

"We're not through with you yet, and don't you forget it, Amos Blackford," retorted Harrison, and his voice was cool and cutting now. "You'll hear from us again, and in a way you least expect. Come on, Denton," and, turning, the bold-faced rascal started from the office of the feed and grain dealer.

Denton hesitated as though he wanted to stay and argue the matter further, but Harrison caught him fiercely by the arm and fairly pulled him outside.

When the two men were gone, Deacon Blackford sat in the now dim office, for dusk was falling. The grain dealer sat still for about a minute. Then he said, aloud:

"Well, I'm well rid of those rascals. I'm glad I stood out firm against them, or they'd have made me lose more money. No, indeed, I'll not give up those papers, and I won't sink any more of my hard-earned cash in their investment schemes. I'm glad I'm through with them, even if I do lose what I put into their business. Yes, indeed! And I'm glad this talk is over."

The deacon locked his desk, and prepared to leave. He had come down to his place of business at this unusual hour, when all his employees were gone, on purpose to be alone with the two men to whom he had granted an interview.

"Yes, I'm glad it's over," he said again. "Now I can give my mind over to dealing with Joe. That

boy is certainly a trial to me! It's the bad blood of his foolish parents cropping out, I suppose. I almost wish I had not adopted him, but I thought he would outgrow the circus and magician instincts. But they are coming out, in spite of all we have done. And to think of burning his suit just to rescue one of those good-for-nothing sleight-of-hand performers!"

The deacon shook his head, walked slowly from his office, and, after locking the door, started down the street in the direction of his home.

"Yes, I really must punish Joe," he murmured. "He needs a severe lesson."

"You're late, Amos," said Mrs. Blackford, as her husband came in to supper. "You're very late. The victuals are all spoiled, but it's a pity to cook anything else."

"Oh, yes, don't throw 'em away," said the old man quickly. "We can't afford to waste anything. I don't mind if the potatoes are dried up. I can eat 'em. I haven't much appetite, anyhow."

The interview with the two rascals had upset the deacon more than he thought. He sat heavily down in his place at the table, while his wife began to serve the meal.

"What made you so late?" she asked. "And why did you have to go back to the store? You never did that before."

"Oh, I had some business to look after," Mr.

Blackford answered. "It was important, but it's all settled now. I won't have to do it again."

He began to eat his supper, and then he happened to think of Joe. Perhaps the sight of the vacant chair on the opposite side of the table brought the boy to his mind.

"Did you take him up anything?" he asked his wife, nodding his head toward Joe's upper room.

"I gave him some bread, just as you told me to."

"Anything else?" asked the old man sharply.

"Well—er—I had plenty of milk so I thought he might as well have a glass of that instead of water."

"Um!" grunted the deacon, but that was all he said just then. Mrs. Blackford did not add that she had buttered the bread, and that the slices were unusually thick, and that she had put one extra on the plate she handed into Joe's room. Mrs. Blackford was a little afraid of the deacon, but Joe had, on this occasion, profited by her slight kindness to him.

She had taken Joe's simple meal up to him at the usual supper time, and he had unlocked his door while taking in the plate of bread and butter and the glass of milk. He did not speak, nor did Mrs. Blackford. It was the regular form of procedure on such unpleasant occasions as this.

Joe was glad when he saw the milk and the extra slice of bread.

"If I'm going to run away," he thought, "I'll

need all the food they give me. I won't be able to get anything at midnight, which is about the time I leave. I suppose I might raid the pantry," he added to himself after a moment's thought, "but then they might hear me and stop me. No, I'll just have to make this do."

He ate the bread and drank the milk, thinking the while of his future. It was a bold step he was taking, and yet Joe did not regret having decided on it. He had reached the limit of patience as far as his foster-parents were concerned. True, he owed something to them, but he felt he had more than paid the debt.

For when Joe's real parents died there was a little sum of money realized from the sale of Professor Morretti's effects, and this the deacon had taken charge of. He used it to clothe and educate Joe, taking out a certain sum each year for "board and lodging."

In consequence the money was all used up, the last of it about two years prior to the opening of this story, so that Joe's little inheritance had paid his way for some years.

Then, when the lad was old enough, the deacon, before and after school hours, had called on Joe's strength in the feed and grain business, Joe being an efficient helper.

The deacon was honest in his way, and he allowed Joe money for this help. But he did not

overpay the lad and part of what he gave, the deacon took back for board and lodging, though allowing Joe a certain sum each week. Joe had saved most of this, and it was from this horde that the deacon proposed deducting the money to pay for the burned suit.

"But he shan't do it!" said Joe fiercely, as he felt of the money he had put in the pocket of his best suit. He was going to wear that when he left, carrying Tom's suit, which he intended leaving on the door-step of the Simpson home, with a note explaining the circumstances.

After his supper, if one could call it that, Joe undressed, and lay down on the bed. He was tired from the day's excitement, and he realized that he had a hard night before him. His plans, as yet, were rather hazy. All he was sure of was that he was going to run away.

Deacon Blackford did not eat much supper. His wife was rather nervously anticipating another scene between him and Joe, but the deacon did not mention the lad's name. Mr. Blackford sat in glum silence after the meal. Finally Mrs. Blackford could stand it no longer. She wanted to know the worst.

"What are you going to do to—him?" she finally asked.

"Who? Joe?"

"Yes. Are you going to—to whip him?"

"I think likely I shall," answered the old man. "He's got to be taught a lesson. But I'll wait until morning to do it. I want to do it without getting angry at him."

Mrs. Blackford breathed a silent sigh of relief. She felt that if the deacon put off the whipping until the next day he might not do it at all. And she dreaded to have it happen. She realized, if her husband did not, that Joe was too big now to be whipped.

The evening began to lengthen into night, and the deacon prepared for bed. Joe was listening in his room for a cessation of sounds that would indicate it would be safe for him to attempt to leave. Finally all was still.

Joe cautiously arose and dressed in the dark. There was a half-moon, and it gave him illumination enough to see without making a light in his room. Putting on his best suit, Joe made a bundle of Tom's clothing. The lad had already packed a valise with his few belongings.

With a length of strong fish-line he lowered his valise from the window to the ground below. He was glad the deacon's bedroom was on the other side of the house. Next Joe lowered the bundle, and then he prepared to make his way down to the ground.

To do this he was going to lower himself, hand over hand, on the lightning rod. The deacon was

old-fashioned enough to have one of these contrivances on his house, and the twisted, galvanized rod, in its glass insulating supports, was close to Joe's window.

To a youth of Joe's muscle and ability in gymnastics it was no feat at all to climb down the lightning rod. On the contrary, Joe thought it fun—or he would have under pleasanter circumstances.

"I'll just give this a pull or two, to make sure it will hold me," Joe mused. "I don't want to come a cropper."

Leaning out of his window, he exerted his strength against the lightning rod. To his dismay it was loose, and a little stronger pull would have torn it away from the side of the house.

"Whew!" whistled Joe, softly. "That's bad. I'll never dare trust my weight to that. I'd come down all at once. I wouldn't mind the fall so very much, but I'd make a racket, and he'd sure wake up. Now what can I do? I ought to have tested that rod this afternoon, and then I could have begun tearing up the sheets into a rope. Maybe I can do that now."

Joe was about to do this, then decided on a more straightforward plan.

"They're both sound asleep," he reflected. "I can easily slip down the stairs and go out the front door. I won't make any noise, and it will be safer even than going down by a bed-sheet rope. That

might break or slip off what I tied it to, and I'd fall anyhow. Yes, I'll go out the front way, but I'll have to be very quiet."

Joe took off his shoes, unlocked his door with great caution, and went softly down the stairs. To his delight they did not creak much, and he soon found himself in the lower hall.

As he was at the front door turning the key, he heard a sudden noise behind him in the darkness.

"Jinks! He's heard me!" reflected Joe quickly. "I've got to run for it!"

He opened the door and fairly leaped off the steps in his stocking-feet. It was the work of but an instant to run around the side path, pick up the bundle of Tom's clothes and the valise, and then leap over the fence to the sidewalk. Then, still carrying his shoes and other things, Joe sped on, running away, fearful lest the awakened deacon should run after him.

CHAPTER IX

THE OVERTURNED LAMP

THE noise which Joe Strong had heard was not caused, as he had feared, by the rousing of Deacon Blackford. All things considered, it might have been well for Joe had it been.

While the youth was running away as fast as he could, considering the fact that he had on no shoes, but had to carry them, as well as his valise and a bundle of clothes, something was taking place back in the deacon's house that was destined to have quite an effect on Joe's life.

He had heard a noise, that was certain, and it had come from the interior of the dark house.

But the noise was not made by the deacon. Instead it came from one of two men who were cautiously entering the Blackford homestead through a rear door, which they had opened by the simple but effective method of "nippering the key."

That is one of them, with a pair of peculiarly shaped pincers, or nippers, had reached the little projecting round end of the key that extends beyond the flat, or ward, part. This is the little end

one sometimes sees sticking partly out of the keyhole, if on the opposite side of the door from the key itself.

Grasping this little end in a pair of nippers that held it securely, one of the men easily turned the key—almost as easily as if he had been on the other side of the door using his fingers to twist the opener in the manner intended by law for it to turn.

As the back door of the deacon's house softly and slowly swung open, two men, wearing masks, quietly entered. And then one of them, as he reached in his pocket for an electric flash lamp, knocked against a chair.

"Keep still! What's the matter with you, Denton, banging about in that way?" demanded the other of the men in a fierce whisper, which, however, was a most guarded whisper. The sound of it did not carry two feet. "What are you doing, anyhow?"

"I couldn't help it," answered Denton. "How was I to know, Jake, that the confounded chair was in the road?"

"You ought to be able to see in the dark," was the retort. "You've been up to enough shady work of late."

"No more than you!"

The reply came sharply. The men were on the verge of a quarrel, and at a time when they needed to work in harmony. All this had passed in a

second, the echo of the noise made by the chair hardly having had time to die away.

"Come, this won't do—scrapping," remarked Harrison, in more conciliatory tones. "We've got to get busy. Listen and see if you think that racket roused him."

The men stood still in the darkness, tensely waiting. They did not hear a sound. They did not hear Joe open the front door, close it and run away. This was because they were at the very back of the house, and also because Joe moved very softly. Thinking, as he did, that the deacon had awakened and was coming after him, Joe determined not to betray himself by any sound.

So, having made a noise themselves, the intruders, listening to determine if it had roused the inmates, did not hear Joe's escape.

"I guess it's all right," came from Denton, still whispering.

"We can't afford to take chances on guessing," was the remark of his companion. "We've got to make sure. We can't risk being caught, for what we're going to do is a state-prison offense."

"How? It is? We're only taking what we have at least half a right to."

"Never mind! Wait until we get through."

"You're not going to do anything desperate, are you?" asked Denton, and he seemed to fear his bolder and rasher companion.

"Keep still. You'll see," was the reply. "Listen for a sound. If we don't hear any in three minutes we'll go on and do the job."

The men waited, tense, silent and anxious, standing there in the darkness, ready to run at the slightest sound. But none came. The noise made by one of them in the collision with the chair, seemed not to have aroused any one in the house.

"All right, come on," whispered Harrison. "You know where he keeps the papers, don't you?"

"Yes. In his desk. It's in what he calls the 'back parlor.' I was in there a couple of times when we were putting the deal through, and I know the very drawer he keeps the papers in. That is, if he hasn't taken them out."

"Oh, I don't think he has, Burke."

"He might have, Jake. You put it on a bit strong this afternoon, telling him we'd get the best of him anyhow. He may be expecting something like this."

"Never! He thinks we've given up. But of course we won't!"

"I should say not! We need those papers."

"Yes, and we need cash, too!"

"You're not going to do that are you—rob him of money?"

Burke Denton seemed much alarmed.

"Oh, keep still and come on," roughly ordered the other. "We are chinning away here like a

couple of women. There's work to be done. Everybody's asleep, it's perfectly safe."

"Where does that lad sleep—Blackford's son?"

"Upstairs on the top floor, I think. But he isn't Blackford's son—only adopted."

"Think he'll make any trouble?"

"No. We can take care of him."

But Joe Strong was then too far off to make any trouble for the intruders. They were now cautiously moving through the house, one of them occasionally flashing a beam from his electric torch to show the way through the rooms.

"Here's the back parlor," announced Denton, who seemed to know the plan of the house.

"All right! Now we'll get busy," whispered his companion. "Get out your keys. We may have to try a lot of 'em before we find one that fits."

"And I sure hope we do find one," murmured Denton. "I don't want to have to force open the desk. It makes too much noise."

"You're right there."

The two criminals seemed on better terms now, and were working in harmony. Advancing by the intermittent flashes of the electric torch, they approached a large, old-fashioned desk where Deacon Blackford kept books, papers and many other things, partly connected with his business, and partly with his home life.

The desk was one of those old-fashioned ones,

with an upper part made in the form of a bookcase, with two glass doors. Below this was a sort of flap, that could be let down. This formed a writing table, and when the flap was down it disclosed rows of pigeonholes, small drawers and compartments for books and papers. Still below this section, and on either side of a hollowed-out place, were more drawers.

"Come on, get busy!" directed Harrison. "You're better at opening desks than I am. Get our your keys. I'll hold the torch."

Denton passed the flashing torch over, and while his companion held it, having slipped the switch to a permanent place, so that there was a steady beam of light, the man with the keys proceeded to try one after another in the keyhole of the desk. He was attempting to lower the writing flap, to come to the compartments and drawers inside.

Key after key he tried, making none but the slightest sounds. But the lock did not give.

"Guess we'll have to jimmy it after all," said Denton. "Hold the light nearer, can't you? Can't see a thing."

"The light's as near as I can get it, and not be in your way," was the retort. "Oh, look! Hang it all! the battery's giving out!"

As he spoke the light quickly began to fade from a bright, white glow of the tungsten filament to a dull yellow. From this it became only a little

red streak, and the two men were suddenly left in darkness.

"This is a nice pickle!" said Harrison, angrily. "Why didn't you put in a fresh battery?"

"I did. You must have been flashing it too often."

"Go on! This is the first time I've held the light to-night. It's all your fault! Now we've either got to call it off or work by the use of matches. We can't see to get the right papers in the dark."

"Wait a minute. I have a scheme," suggested Denton. "I saw a lamp on the table right here. I'll light that."

"If it's got any oil in it," half-sneered Harrison.

"Oh, they keep their lamps filled I reckon. Stand still now, and I'll light it."

Denton struck a match, found the lamp and presently had the wick aglow.

"Turn it down, you chump!" hoarsely whispered Harrison. "That can be seen from outside."

Denton lowered the wick until the light was dim, but even then it was better to work by than had been the electric torch, for the illumination was more diffused.

Denton went to work with the keys again, and luck seemed to be with him, for after two trials the desk was opened. It was the work of but a few minutes for the men to sort over the papers and pick out those they wanted.

"Now we've got 'em!" exclaimed Denton. "I guess he'll talk business to us now!"

"We won't bother to talk business, now we've got what we want," answered Harrison. "We'll just light out. But before we go we might as well have this. No use passing up a chance like this."

He reached over his companion's shoulder and took a roll of bills from a drawer that had been opened in the course of the search for the papers.

"You're not going to take that, are you?" asked Denton. "Why, we've got the papers."

"Yes; and we're going to have some money, too. I told the deacon we'd get even with him, and I'm doing it. This will come in handy."

He pocketed the money. The other shook his head.

"That's wrong!" he said. "It's risky, too. We ought to be satisfied with the papers."

"Maybe you are, but I'm not. I'll take all the cash I can lay my hands on. And while we're here we might as well see if there's any more. There's a clock over there. Lots of country folks stick bills in clocks. I'm going to have a look."

Despite the protests of his companion, Harrison went over to a mantel where stood a large wooden clock. As he opened the door he exclaimed:

"Talk about luck! Here's another roll. Say, I'm glad we came!"

"Put that back!" commanded the other. "We have enough."

"Never can have enough cash," chuckled the other. "This makes the haul worth while. Now we'll go!"

The talk had been done in whispers, and every move of the men was a silent one. Denton, who was not quite such a rascal as Harrison, protested against taking the money, but in vain.

"I've got it, and I'm going to keep it!" was the last word of Harrison.

"Well, it'll get us into trouble, you see if it won't," declared the more timid of the intruders.

"If it does, it'll help us out of trouble, too. I'm going to keep the money, and you don't have to take your share if you don't want to. Now we'll just take another look through the desk, for we may have missed something, and then——"

But what else Harrison was going to propose was not made manifest, for at that instant Denton exclaimed:

"Keep still! I hear a noise!"

There was no doubt of it. Some one could be heard coming down the front stairs.

"Come on!" hoarsely whispered Harrison. "We've got to beat it!"

Denton turned to go out the way they had come in, by the rear door, but his companion caught him by the arm.

"Not that way!" he whispered in his ear. "We'd be caught sure! This window—the one by the desk —come on!"

It was the work of but an instant to slip the catch and raise the window. Harrison jumped out followed by Denton, and as the latter cleared the sill his foot knocked the lamp off the desk to the floor.

There was a crash of glass, and as Denton and Harrison ran off in the darkness they saw a flash of flame, and they smelled burning kerosene.

"What's that?" asked Harrison, turning for a swift backward glance.

"I kicked over the lamp—accidental," gasped Denton. "It's exploded and started a fire. We—we'll have to go back and put it out!"

Harrison laughed in a low chuckle.

"Go back nothing!" he whispered fiercely. "Let it burn!"

CHAPTER X

THE SIDE-DOOR PULLMAN

JOE STRONG, unaware of the exciting events that were taking place in the home of his foster-parents —a home he had deserted for what, to him, were good and sufficient reasons—hurried on down the silent and dark streets of Bedford. It was unusual in such a small town for any one to be out after midnight, unless there were some special occasion, and the young wizard had the place to himself.

"Well, I got out of that all right," he said, half aloud, as he stopped, when safely around the corner, to put on his shoes. "I got away without the deacon's seeing me. But he was right after me, and I didn't think I made much noise.

"Let's see now," went on our hero, musingly, as he straightened up after lacing his shoes. "What had I better do? Say, it's great to feel free to do just as one pleases for the first time in years!"

Joe flung up his arms and gazed at the silent, blinking stars which sprinkled the sky overhead.

"It sure does feel good to be your own boss! I can go when I please, and come when I please, and

I don't have to stand the shame of a beating just because I burned a suit in saving a man's life! It sure is good to be free!"

Joe was to learn that it is not all joy and happiness to be "free," and to be one's "own boss," but, just at present, he felt only a sense of exultation.

"First I've got to leave this bundle at Tom's house," thought Joe, as he picked up the suit which had been loaned him. "I'll leave it there with a note that will explain. I wish I could see some of the boys to bid 'em good-bye, but maybe it's just as well not to. They might laugh at me, and I wouldn't want that. Some day, when I'm a well-known magician, I'll come back and give 'em a show that will open their eyes!"

Joe next picked up his valise. It was rather heavy, for he had stuffed in it belongings that had accumulated for years—little mementos and keepsakes of younger days. He also had in it what clothes he felt he would need. But Joe did not feel the weight of his satchel now. It was as light as a feather to him.

And to prove it Joe tossed it up in the air, also the bundle of Tom's clothes, and there in the darkness of midnight, standing in the middle of one of Bedford's principal streets, he juggled the objects in the most approved style, using a small stone he had picked up for the third piece to make a symmetrical act.

"I'll be able to do some juggling if I have to, when I want to fill in between tricks," thought Joe. "I do hope I can get work in some sort of a show. Professor Rosello ought to be able to give me a letter, introducing me to some of his friends in the business.

"Well, standing here juggling and thinking about it won't get me anywhere," said Joe, in a sort of stage whisper. "I'd better be moving if I'm to get a berth in my side-door Pullman," and he laughed in a silent fashion at the idea.

Joe had made up his mind to go to the town of Lorilard, distant about fifty miles from Bedford, where Professor Rosello was to give a performance the next day, and for two or three days following. This much the magician had told Joe in the interview at the hotel, when he gave him a list of his stopping places.

"Yes, I'll go to see the professor at Lorilard," decided Joe. "He can't any more than turn me down. But he promised to help me, and he was grateful to me. I believe he'll be able to do something." Now for Tom's house, and then my 'berth!'"

Joe had made up his mind to take the midnight freight that stopped at Bedford, and which arrived in Lorilard some time in the early morning. Joe was not particular as to time.

"I'll have to save what money I have," thought

the boy, "so I won't have any to waste on railroad fare. A freight car will suit me."

Joe Strong walked on through the dark and silent streets. He kept on the grass as much as possible, for his footsteps rang out loudly in the quietness, and Joe knew that "Hen" Sylvester and Tim Donovan, the two policemen of Bedford, did not spend quite all the night in sleep.

"I just wouldn't like 'em to see me going away like this," thought Joe. "They'd be sure to stop and ask me questions. And if I make too much noise walking on the sidewalks they may hear me. It's me for the green grass."

And so he went on until he came to the Simpson house. Joe there came to a pause, and looked at the dwelling. No light showed.

"Guess they're all asleep," he mused. "I wouldn't want any of the family to see me sneaking up and leaving a bundle on the steps. They might take me for a burglar, and raise a row."

Silently and cautiously he opened the front gate, and tiptoed up the brick walk, leaving his valise outside. He laid the suit of clothes, with a little note he had written, in plain view on the door-step, and then with a whispered good-bye to Tom, which that sound-sleeping lad did not hear, Joe set off again.

"Now I'm really on my way," he told himself. "The whole world lies before me, as we used to

see in our school readers, and I have my own fortune to make. And I hope I begin to make it soon," mused the lad, whimsically. "At least I hope Dame Fortune allows me to draw a few dollars a week in advance."

As Joe turned into a street that led to the freight station and caught sight of what was left standing of the fireworks factory, he could but think of the stirring events in which he had played such a prominent part—the discussion with his chums of the professor's tricks, the alarm of the explosion, the swimming of the creek, and the sensational rescue of Professor Rosello.

There was no sign of the fire as Joe passed the scene of it now. It had all died out, and the main building was surrounded by heaps of ashes which marked where the smaller structures had stood.

Two loud, shrill whistles broke the midnight stillness.

"The freight!" cried Joe, breaking into a run. "She's getting ready to leave! I wonder if I can make it.

"She's leaving ahead of time," Joe went on. The freight arrived in Bedford at midnight and left an hour later, an event which Joe had counted on in making his calculations to leave by it. But the train was getting ready to pull out now, fully twenty minutes early, the two whistles Joe heard being the signal for "off brakes;" though with the

modern air apparatus this was really only a starting signal, the brakemen being no longer required to run along the tops of the cars to loosen the wheels.

"I'll have to hustle!" Joe told himself, as he increased his pace.

The youth was in fine physical condition, and he knew he could easily reach the freight train before it passed entirely beyond the station, for it was a long one.

"But I counted on having time to pick out a car," thought Joe, still running toward the railroad. "I wonder what I can do now?"

The matter worried him. It is not easy to "jump" a moving freight train. There are no cars with steps, such as passenger coaches have, with convenient hand rails. Jumping a moving freight train is a risky matter, even for a trained railroad brakeman.

"And how I'm to do it with this valise I don't know," thought Joe. "But it's got to be done!"

He was glad he was in such good physical trim.

"I see what the trouble is," Joe went on. "There wasn't any shipment of fireworks to-night, and that's why the freight pulled out earlier. I didn't think of that."

As he ran on down the street he heard a voice behind him calling:

"Here! Hold on! Stop! Who are you?"

"Hen Sylvester!" gasped Joe. "He's seen me

and he's suspicious. Well, I've no time to stop and explain now. I'd miss the train sure!"

He ran on, faster than before. He heard the patter of feet behind him, and again the hail:

"Hold on, or I'll shoot!"

"He'll only shoot in the air if he does," Joe told himself. "I'll take a chance. I guess he doesn't know who I am."

He was near the freight depot now. Another few steps and he was on the long covered platform along which the train was moving. None of the trainmen or depot freight handlers were in sight. It was a "light" night, and they had gotten through early.

Joe watched the train gliding along in front of him, rapidly acquiring speed. The platform was on a level with the floor of the freight cars.

"If I could only see one with an open door," mused Joe. "Then I could dive into it. I don't dare take a chance of jumping in between two cars. I might slip down between the buffers."

Eagerly he watched the gliding train. Oh, for an open door!

Joe heard other feet now pounding along the wooden platform.

"It's Hen coming to see who I am!" thought Joe.

He looked for a hiding place. And yet to hide meant to lose the chance of taking the freight out of town.

"I saw him come up here!" some one said.

"We'll get him," said another. "He's probably a burglar!"

"Tim Donovan is with Hen now," thought Joe. "They're both after me—the whole Bedford police force," and in spite of his predicament he chuckled.

Just then there glided past him a freight car with a wide open door.

"Here's my chance!" cried Joe half aloud. And the next second he made a flying leap into the moving "side-door Pullman."

Joe Strong was on his way—whither?

CHAPTER XI

A SURPRISED DEACON

DEACON BLACKFORD had certainly heard a noise. It was not the slight sound made by Joe Strong, when that young magician made his escape from the house, but it was the louder noise made by the two rascals in taking the papers and money.

"What's that, Amos?" asked Mrs. Abigail Blackford, as she too heard the suspicious sound.

"I don't know," he answered sleepily enough. He had lain awake the early part of the night, tossing restlessly, for the memory of the scene in the afternoon with the two men had bothered the deacon.

"But, Amos," persisted his wife, "it *is* a noise."

"Yes," he admitted, after listening a moment, "it surely is."

"Hadn't you better get up and see what it is?" she suggested.

He waited a moment before replying, meanwhile listening intently. The sound was plainer now.

"Couldn't be cats, could it?" the deacon asked, and his voice was hopeful. He did not like to get up, for he was tired and sleepy.

"Cats! No, the idea!" his wife exclaimed. "It's somebody downstairs inside the house, Amos, and you've got to get up and see who it is."

"Queer time for anybody to be calling," grumbled Joe's foster-father.

"Calling! It isn't anybody calling!" exclaimed Mrs. Blackford in a shrill whisper. "It's burglars if it's anybody. Get up, Amos, and drive 'em out. Call Joe to help you. He's good and strong. He can handle almost as much as you can."

But without waiting to call Joe, Mr. Blackford gave a jump out of bed and hurried down the stairs in the darkness. As he went down he became aware of a light in the back parlor—the room where stood his desk, which was like a safe to him, and the old clock where his wife insisted on keeping her small roll of bills, on the theory that burglars would never think of money being in a clock.

"It is some one," muttered the deacon. "I'm glad I got up."

He hurried on, taking no pains to muffle the "clap-clap" of the heels of his slippers, into which he had hurriedly thrust his feet. "Clap-clap" they went, down the stairs.

Just as he reached the door of the back parlor the deacon saw a form disappearing through the window. Who it was he could not see, as just then the heel of the person making an egress in

this queer fashion hit and knocked over the lamp, which exploded with a slight noise, the burning oil setting fire to the carpet and the lace curtains.

For the moment the fear of fire was uppermost in the mind of the deacon. He saw the stream of blazing oil spreading, and he knew that in a few moments more the whole room would be ablaze.

But the deacon was quick, and, fortunately did not lose his presence of mind. He caught up a heavy rug, and, not going near enough the blaze to let his own thin night garments catch, he tossed the rug over the blaze, smothering it.

Then with a quick motion he tore down the burning lace curtains, and tossed them out of the open window, where they could harmlessly consume themselves on the grass. The deacon burned his hands slightly in pulling down the curtains, but he did not notice that in the excitement of the moment.

The fire was out almost as soon as it had started, for he had tossed the rug over burning lamp and all, and now only some dense black smoke remained to tell what had happened.

"Whew!" panted the deacon, "that was a close call! It's a good thing I got up when I did, or the whole house would have gone! A narrow shave!"

He got a pail of water to toss on the smouldering carpet, after he had lifted the smothering rug,

and as he doused out the few remaining sparks his wife called to him.

"Anybody down there, Amos?"

"No, nobody now," grimly answered the old man.

"Well, it smells like some one was smoking down there. I smell smoke, Amos. There *must* be somebody there!"

"No! They've gone," he answered. "It was the lamp you smelled smoking. It blew up!"

"Blew up! Deacon Blackford what ails you? What's happened, anyhow?"

"I don't rightly know yet, myself. Seems quite considerable must have happened, and it might have been worse. You can come down if you want to. There's nobody here now but me, and the fire's out."

"The fire's out!" cried his wife from the head of the stairs. "What fire? Who started the fire?"

"Come down and you'll see it all," he answered, looking about to make sure there were no stray sparks anywhere.

Mrs. Blackford lost no time in descending, and her surprise was as great as was the deacon's. But it was the loss of her curtains, the burned hole in the carpet, the broken lamp and the charred rug that surprised Joe's foster-mother. She had not seen the intruder go out of the window, as had her husband.

"What in the world—how did it—who——?" she began, hardly knowing what question to ask first. But the deacon cut in with:

"I don't know any more about it than you do. I came down in time to see somebody go through the window and kick over the lamp. Then the fire started and I had to hustle to put it out."

"Some one went through the window! Who in the world could it have been? Did you speak to him?"

"Burglars don't generally leave a card, nor stop to talk," answered the old man grimly. "But I guess——"

The deacon did not finish, but crossed the room to his desk. He noticed that the flap was down, and he knew he had closed and locked it the night before. Hurriedly he ran through his papers, and then straightened up with a queer look on his face.

"They're gone!" he gasped. "Gone!"

"What?" asked his wife. "What's gone?"

"My investment papers—the securities—the only thing I had to show what money was due me. They're gone and whoever has 'em can make use of 'em! I've been robbed!"

Turning again to the desk he opened a small drawer.

"He took the money too!" he muttered. "Every cent of it, and there was nigh on to a hundred dollars there!"

He fairly moaned out the words, and putting his hand to his head sank weakly into a chair. Mrs. Blackford regarded her husband pityingly and darted toward him, fearing he was going to faint, though he had never done it in his life. Then a sudden idea came to her.

She rushed over to the clock, opened it and fell back, raising her hands in the air in astonishment.

"Mine's gone too!" she cried! "The thirty-nine dollars I had in the clock! The burglar took that too! Oh, this is terrible! You must call the constables, Amos! We've been robbed! They took my money! Call Joe, and send him after Hen Sylvester. I'll call him," for the deacon seemed incapable of action just then.

Mrs. Blackford hurried upstairs, and called: "Joe! Joe! Get up! There've been burglars in the house! They've robbed your pa and me, and set fire to the place! Get up and go for the constables!"

"Is he coming?" asked the deacon, whose heart was not beating quite so fast now.

"I can't seem to make him hear," said Mrs. Blackford.

"I'll rout him out," said the old man. "I guess he'd better go after the constable. He can go quicker than I can."

But Joe did not answer to this summons either, and when the door of his room was opened, show-

ing his undisturbed bed, and when a quick search revealed that he had taken most of his belongings the deacon jumped to the most natural conclusion.

"He's gone, Abigail!" he cried. "Joe's run away, and it was him that robbed us and set fire to the place!"

"Oh, no, Deacon! *He* wouldn't do such a thing!"

"Woman, I tell you he did!" cried the deacon in his most thundering tones. "He's robbed us and run away! I'll get the law after him! The thief!" and with a face flushed with wrath the deacon proceeded to dress, muttering the while:

"He robbed us! Joe robbed us and ran away! I always knew that the circus and magician blood in him would tell! Now it's come out with a vengeance!"

CHAPTER XII

THE PROFESSOR'S ASSISTANT

JOE STRONG slid half way across the "side-door Pullman," as he had called the freight car into which he had jumped from the station platform. One cause for his sliding was the force of his jump, the momentum carrying him. Another reason was because the floor of the car was covered with bits of dried hay, which is always slippery.

"A hay car!" exclaimed Joe, as his nose caught the odor that was so familiar to him. "Been loaded with baled hay. I'm glad I struck something as clean as that. Might just as well have jumped into a car that had been filled with fertilizer, or something else not nice to smell all night. Yes, I guess I'm in luck."

The train was now swinging along at a good pace, and Joe proceeded to make himself comfortable for his long ride which, at best, was not going to be any too easy for him.

The youth chuckled to himself as he thought of the two town policemen vainly seeking him.

"That's another time I gave Hen Sylvester the

slip," murmured Joe with a smile in the darkness.

Though the hay car had been unloaded there still remained on the floor a quantity of the fodder. With his feet Joe made this into a pile in one corner, and there he intended to lie down to get some sleep if he could. The night was warm, and he needed no covering. But he slid the door partly shut to keep out some of the dirt and cinders.

"This isn't going to improve the appearance of my clothes—sleeping in 'em," he mused. "Guess I'll take off my coat and vest. I can save them a little that way, anyhow."

Then Joe stretched out on his improvised bed and drew a long breath.

"Well, so far so good," he told himself. "I'm on my way. Now the rest is up to Professor Rosello. I'll see him in the morning."

Joe did not easily go to sleep, though he was tired. He had a burden on his mind, and he was not a little worried.

"I wonder what the deacon will think when he wakes up and finds me gone?" thought Joe. "I guess it will surprise him."

If Joe only knew!

Finally drowsiness came, and he slumbered through the rest of the night. The train rattled on, stopping now and then at stations to pick up or leave freight, but Joe knew nothing of this. He had thought that perhaps he might be put off the

car by some brakeman, but he decided he must take chances on this. And, as it happened, he was not disturbed.

Joe was awakened by the sudden jolting stop of the train, and, as he opened his eyes he saw, through the partly shut door, that the sun was brightly shining.

"Good-morning—morning!" cried the lad. "I wonder what you have up your sleeve for me?"

Though he tried to be jolly with himself, he was not in very good shape for joking. He was lame and stiff from sleeping on the hay-bed, and he felt the need of washing, as any one does, even if he travels in a real Pullman. Then, too, he was hungry.

"Wonder if we hit anything then?" Joe asked himself, for the train seemed to have stopped with unusual suddenness. "Guess I'll take a look out."

He peered from the door, and saw that the train was in a large railroad yard. On several adjoining tracks were lines of freight cars, and, as Joe looked out, he saw the engine that had been pulling his train going off toward the round house.

"This must be Lorilard," thought Joe. "It's the end of the run. That bump must have been some other cars they switched on to the end of this train. Well, I've arrived, it seems. Now to get busy, find the professor and—— But first I guess I'd better

get a wash and have something to eat," he reflected. "I can't look very presentable."

Joe put on his vest and coat, picked up his valise and was about to jump down out of the freight car into the yard, when he saw a trainman approaching.

"I'd better wait until he passes," Joe thought. "He might make it hot for me."

There is a law against unauthorized persons riding on freight trains, and though some brakemen often let tramps and other persons "steal" a ride, still most railroad men are not as lenient, and not infrequently throw off, or "beat-up," those who "ride the brake-rods," or crawl into the empty cars.

Joe drew back, but the man did not pass on. Instead he busied himself tacking up shipping cards on several cars near the one Joe was in.

"I wish he'd go!" reflected our hero. "I want to get out. I'm almost starved."

Finally the man moved farther down the track, and Joe took this chance to emerge. He dropped to the ground, but, unluckily, just then the yardmaster, for he it was, turned and saw the young wizard.

"Here, you!" he roared. "What do you mean? Stealing a ride? I'll fix you!" and he started to run after Joe.

But Joe was a good sprinter, and, though he was

rather stiff from his uncomfortable bed, he was more than a match for the yard-master. Seeing that the "tramp," as he supposed him to be, was distancing him, the man caught up an iron coupling pin and threw it at Joe.

If it had hit the youth it might have hurt him badly, but the yard-master's aim was no better than his running, and Joe was soon safely out of his reach. There came a break in the line of freight cars, and Joe slipped through this, thus getting out of sight.

"And I'd better stop running, I reckon," he thought, "or some other trainman may think it suspicious to see me in such a hurry."

He slowed down to a walk, and presently emerged from the yard into a street.

"Will you kindly direct me to a hotel?" asked Joe of the first man he met. "I'm a stranger in town. I don't want an expensive place."

"There's the Railroad House, just down at the foot of this street," the man said, looking at Joe curiously. "I can't recommend it, though it's cheap enough. Then there's the Boswell, three blocks up that way and two over," and he indicated the directions. "I stop there myself. It's good and not expensive."

"Thank you," Joe said. "I'll try that."

"Just get in?" asked the man, and he smiled.

"Yes," answered the young magician. "My

special car was just switched off for me!" and he laughed as he turned away.

He found the Boswell to be just about the kind of hotel that came within his limited means. He did not want to engage a room until after he had seen Professor Rosello, and he was not sure where the magician was stopping. But he could easily inquire.

The hotel clerk was friendly, and agreed to look after Joe's valise while our hero had breakfast. Joe indulged in a good wash and ate a hearty meal.

On inquiry at the hotel desk when he claimed his satchel, he found that the professor was going to give a performance that night. The clerk did not know where Professor Rosello was staying, but Joe thought he could find out by inquiring at the Opera House, as the local amusement place was called.

As Joe made his way thither he saw, posted in various parts of the town, large announcements of the "world-wide famous and renowned magician, prestidigitator and sleight-of-hand artist, Professor Alonzo Rosello."

"He's the one I'm looking for all right," thought Joe. "Now to see what's doing."

He inquired his way to the Opera House and entered the lobby. There was no one in the ticket office, for it was early yet.

A woman was scrubbing the oilcloth on the floor of the entrance.

"Is Professor Rosello about?" asked Joe.

"Who's he?" inquired the woman, who appeared to be slightly deaf, if her loud tones counted for anything.

"He's the prestidigitator—the magician——"

The old woman shook her head.

"I don't know none of them foreign languages," she said. "You'll have to speak plain English. And my name ain't Maggie, neither."

"I didn't say Maggie—I said magician," and Joe spoke louder. "I'm looking for Professor Rosello. Him!" he exclaimed, as he saw, hanging on the wall one of the magician's bills, containing what was supposed to be a likeness of him in evening clothes, with a little red imp whispering secrets in his ear.

"Oh, him! That feller what does tricks? He's back on the stage," said the old woman, resuming her scrubbing.

Taking this as an invitation to go back, Joe made his way to the rear of the theatre. There was a single light on the stage, and Joe could see the professor moving about, arranging some of his apparatus in anticipation of the evening's performance. And Joe heard the magician talking loudly, and as if very much disturbed about something.

"It couldn't have happened at a much worse time!" exclaimed the professor. "I don't see what possessed him to run away and leave me just when I needed him. I don't know what I'm to do. I'll have to omit some of my best illusions! It's too bad!"

Joe kept on down the aisle, and, passing through one of the boxes, reached the stage, which was not yet "set" for the performance.

He then saw Professor Rosello talking to a stage-hand, and went over to speak to him.

"Well, what is it?" asked the professor, not recognizing Joe, for the place was dark.

"Don't you remember me?" our hero questioned. "I'm Joe Strong who——"

"Well met! Say, but I *am* glad to see you!" cried the magician, heartily. "Perhaps you're just the very one who can help me out!"

"Well, I'll be very glad if I can," said Joe. "I came to you to ask you to help me. I want a place where I can earn my living. I've run away from home, and I'm going to learn to be a magician. I thought perhaps——"

"Tell me the details later!" cut in the professor. "I'm in a peck of trouble now. My assistant, whom I always have with me when I play in the larger towns, left me in a fit of anger, and just when I needed him most. He wanted more money than I could afford to pay, and I'm left in the lurch. Now

you know something about illusions, so, perhaps, with a little coaching, you can help me out. Will you do it?"

"Will I?" Joe cried. "Just give me the chance! It's what I've been hoping for all along!"

CHAPTER XIII

JOE'S HELP NEEDED

JOE could hardly believe his good luck. When he decided to run away he had no settled plans in mind. All he expected to do was to seek out Professor Rosello, and ask him what would be the best means of starting in on the chosen career. But to be engaged without any delay as an assistant was beyond Joe's wildest hopes.

It had come about by a curious trick of fate, and Joe was very much pleased.

"Do you really mean it?" he asked the professor, as they stood on the dimly lighted stage.

"Mean it? Of course I do. My assistant who was to help me with to-night's performance suddenly left, and I didn't know what to do.

"As soon as I recognized you, I remembered that you had some knowledge of our way of doing things. Then, too, as I told you before, you have in you naturally, and because of practice, the makings of a magician. So I think you can very easily fill the shoes of my late assistant. He was clever, but not reliable. Of course I can not pay you much

money. I will begin on ten dollars a week, and I'll pay all your expenses. Later on, if you do well, as I'm sure you will, I'll increase the amount, for you may be able to help me do more elaborate tricks, and so we will draw better houses. Does that satisfy you?"

"Indeed it does!" cried Joe.

This was luck in truth, for this, too, was more than he had hoped for. He would have been glad to work with the professor to earn merely his expenses for a while, until he learned something of the inside workings of magic.

"Now," said Professor Rosello, "we'll have to do some quick work, Joe. I'll call you that, for I feel as if I had known you a long time. I'll never forget how you saved my life, and you will never want a friend as long as I am alive. Where are you stopping?"

"No place, just at present," replied Joe. "I came in on a freight train, after I ran away from home, and I looked you up as soon as I could after I had breakfast."

Then Joe told the story of how he had left the home of his foster-parents.

"You had better put up at my hotel," said the professor. "I'm stopping at a boarding house. It's better for me than a regular hotel. I can get you a room there. I had planned to give a three nights' show here, but when my assistant left I thought I'd

have to cut it down to one. Now I'll go ahead as originally planned, thanks to you.

"Now suppose we just run over what I do in the evening's performance, so you'll know what is expected of you."

Professor Rosello hastily described to Joe the program—how he came out on the stage, rolling in his hands a red handkerchief, which he caused suddenly to vanish. Of course this was done by "palming." While palming the handkerchief, which thus seemed to vanish into air, the professor would keep up a "patter," or running line of talk, concerning the tricks he was to show that night.

"Of course you know," said the professor to Joe, "that we have to depend on outside aid in doing what the public calls 'tricks.' That is, we have as our three main helpers, the table, the wand and the clothes we wear. I need not tell the son of Professor Morretti that the evening dress of a modern magician has in it many hiding places—*pochettes,* the French call them. They are secret pockets, placed where the performer finds he has best use for them. Into these pockets a borrowed watch, ring, handkerchief—anything not too large, in fact—may be concealed.

"Of course we bring the hidden things out at the proper time. But, as I say, the dress of a magician is important. I haven't time to get you

one, and my assistant took his away with him, so you won't be able to do much for me in that line.

"Another great aid to us is our wand. From time immemorial a wand has been the symbol of magic. Ordinarily it is but a stick, a bit of ebony or ivory, and of course with that it is not possible to do any tricks. But the wand is valuable in that you can wave it in the air, or before a person's face. Naturally their eyes follow the motion of the wand, their attention is taken from your other hand, in which you may have palmed, or concealed, something. And while their eyes are thus off that hand you can get rid of the palmed article, or put it in the place where you wish it next to appear."

"Yes, I have read of that in some books treating of magic," said Joe.

"The books don't tell you everything," said the professor with a smile, "but of course they are valuable. I want to tell you that nowadays we have two wands, instead of one. One is an ordinary piece of ebony, solid, and not prepared in any way. Then we have a combined hollow wand, in one end of which is concealed a small pistol, so that by a mere pressure on a spring, which is all but invisible, we can produce a shot. On the other end of the wand is a concealed claw and spring, so that I can draw into the hollow a silk handkerchief or light piece of cloth, making it disappear before the very eyes of the audience. Of course the substitution of

the trick wand for the solid one must be made unseen by the audience."

"Yes, I should think so," commented Joe.

"The tall hat is another great aid to us who work in magic," went on the professor. "But of late years it is hard to borrow one in an ordinary audience, so I don't often use it. Years ago, when more men wore tall, silk hats, it was easy to borrow one from somebody in the audience, and do all sorts of tricks with it—or, rather, with one of my own which I substituted unseen. My hat, of course, was made for my purpose. It had secret compartments in it and the lining being black, they did not show when I held it up to show that, apparently, it was empty.

"I might state, Joe, that of course nothing ever comes out of a tall hat, or any other kind of a hat, my own, or that of any one else, unless it has first been put there. 'Loaded' is the term we use. That is to say, I must first put into the hat a live rabbit, a cannon ball, a piece of cheese, an egg—anything, in fact, that I wish to produce I must first put in the prepared hat. Then I can bring it out.

"So much for the hat. Only, as I said, tall hats are rather hard to borrow, so I often work with an ordinary derby, having one of my own made with a secret compartment. Only it has to be small, as derbies haven't much spare space."

"It would be great if we could work with a straw hat—especially if we gave a show in summer!" exclaimed Joe.

"Why, it would, yes. I never thought of that!" exclaimed Professor Rosello. "I believe we could have a trick straw hat made. Say, Joe, I'm glad to see you taking an interest this way."

"Oh, I'm going to be a magician!" cried the youth. "I want to find out all I can about it."

"It's too bad your father didn't live to tell you about his tricks," said the magician. "He was a real artist, while the most of us are but imitators. However, it can't be helped. I will teach you all I know if you want to learn."

"I surely do!" murmured the boy.

"Now to finish my little preliminary talk," went on the sleight-of-hand artist, "I will mention the table. That, or in fact several tables or little stands, are of great aid to a magician. In the early days the performers used a big table, all draped about with velvet, and concealed under this velvet was an assistant.

"When the magician wanted to cause an object to disappear he would place it on the table just over a hole, which was not in view because it was hidden by a trap door. Then he would put a hollow cone or hollow block over the object, which would at once drop through the hole in the table, into the hands of the concealed assistant.

"But as performers became more clever they used simpler tables. Some, of course, seemed to be just spindle-legged affairs, but mirrors fitted in made a place where objects could be concealed, though it seemed as though the audience could look right through the legs of the table. But there are some tables which are not at all mechanical, except that they have a place at the back for a *servante*, or shelf, below the level of the table, and on this shelf objects can be placed when the performer has to get rid of them for the time being."

"It sounds complicated," murmured Joe.

"It's simple when you understand it," said the professor. "I sometimes use as a *servante* a little mesh bag, which I can fasten to the back of a chair —that is if the back can't be seen through. Then of course I have little tables—*console* tables they were called in the days of Robert-Houdin.

"These tables stand close to the draperies which are back of the stage, and above the tables is a slit cut in the curtain, the fall of the draperies concealing it. Through this slit my assistant can thrust his hand and take away or substitute certain articles. That will be part of your work.

"So then, with the wand, with a suit having in it many secret pockets, and with the help of a *servante* in one form or another we do most of our tricks, never forgetting that palming is one vital need. Of course I have elaborate pieces of ap-

paratus—that is elaborate for me, some performers carry much more than I do. But the tendency in these days is to get away from big mechanical effects, since the audience knows there is some trick about them, even though it can't be seen.

"Of course you know some of what I have told you, Joe, but I thought it no harm to repeat it. Now I'll give you a little drill, and we'll be ready for to-night."

The professor told Joe the principal tricks he proposed performing that night. In comparatively few of them was Joe's aid needed, except that he was to be on the stage to hand the professor articles when wanted, or to remove them—passive sort of work.

But in one trick—that of making a young man disappear when seated in a chair on the stage in full view of the audience—Joe took an active part.

Having gone over as much as he thought necessary, Professor Rosello took Joe to the boarding house, where they would stay for at least three nights. There, too, the magician gave Joe more instructions, and had him practice some palming and card tricks. Joe was naturally good at these.

"I'm almost glad my regular assistant failed me," the professor said, "for I think you are going to be better, Joe. You have a natural aptitude for learning this art."

"I'm glad you think so," remarked the youth, "for I want very much to perfect myself in it."

That afternoon Joe and the professor went through several tricks for practice, taking care that no small boys or other unauthorized persons were secretly in the theatre to see how the tricks were done, and so reveal them.

The night of the performance came at last, and Joe went to the Opera House with the professor. They went back on the stage to see that all was in readiness for the curtain to rise.

"A good house," remarked Professor Rosello, as he peered through the peep-hole of the curtain. "We'll make a little money to-night, Joe."

"I'm glad of it. I wouldn't want to bring you bad luck."

"Oh, I think you'll bring me good luck. Now we're ready, I guess."

The curtain went up, the professor came out, bowing and smiling and making the handkerchief disappear by cleverly palming it, then slipping it into one of his secret pockets, afterward seeming to draw it from the end of his wand. To do this, of course, he merely palmed it again, and let it gradually appear as he wished.

Then he did several stock tricks; one of them being the bringing forth of a small jar of goldfish seemingly from a man's derby hat.

There was no trick about the hat. The pro-

fessor went down off the stage and borrowed it, but, on his way back, while his back was toward the audience, he slipped into the hat a flat dish filled with water and live goldfish. This dish Joe had passed to him a moment before from behind the scenes, through one of the slits in the curtain.

The professor concealed the flat jar of goldfish, water and all, under his vest, but the dish had over it a tightly fitting cover, made of a thin sheet of rubber.

As he walked back on to the stage Professor Rosello slipped the dish into the hat, and, as he lifted it out, in full view of the audience, he, unseen by the spectators, snapped off the rubber cover with his thumb. Thus he seemed to bring out a jar of fish in real water, and there was no doubt about the realness of the water, nor the life of the fish. They could be seen swimming about, and the professor dipped his hand in the water, sprinkling it about the stage. Then he passed the hat back to the man.

The goldfish had been purchased in a store that day, and kept in water until needed, Joe putting them in the flat dish, and slipping over the rubber cover just before they were to be used.

"Now for my next trick," began Professor Rosello, "I shall want to borrow a boy or young man. I don't want one who has any friends, as I am going to cause him to disappear, and of course

no one wants that to happen to a friend. I am going to make him totally disappear. Who will lend me a young man for that purpose.

"Come now," he went on, as there was a pause. "I see several young ladies here with young men. Surely one of them can be spared. No? No one will volunteer?"

There were smiles and some laughter.

"I see a nice young man right here," the professor said, coming down the steps, and standing close to a young girl and her escort. He laid his hand on the youth's shoulder.

"You haven't any use for him, have you?" he asked the blushing girl. "May I not make him disappear?"

"No!" she laughed.

"Very well, then I must find some one else."

There was a movement in the back of the house as if some one intended to volunteer, but, as the professor did not want this, he forestalled it by quickly saying:

"Never mind. I see you are all afraid. Well, I will call on my young assistant. He is not of much use to me, or to the world either, so I will make him disappear."

This was Joe's signal to come forward for one of the more elaborate tricks.

CHAPTER XIV

JOE'S DISAPPEARANCE

"You're not afraid to be made to vanish into thin air, are you?" asked Professor Rosello of Joe, that being part of the "patter" of this trick. "You don't mind being made to vanish?"

"No," answered Joe, "not if it doesn't hurt." The audience laughed. Joe was getting on surprisingly well. He had feared he would be stricken with stage fright on this, his first appearance in public. But there was not the least sign of it, though there was a packed house. One reason was that, of course, the magician occupied the center of the stage most of the time, and all eyes were focused on him. Joe had only a minor part as yet. But, also, there must have been something inherited by him from his parents, who fairly lived in the public eye. Joe took to it naturally.

"You see he doesn't mind in the least," the professor said to the audience. "He'll never be missed, and if I used some boy from the audience this might not be the case."

"For this trick," went on the professor, "I need

a young man. I have this—er—useless specimen——" and he tapped Joe on the shoulder. There was more laughter from the audience. "I also need," proceeded Professor Rosello, "a chair, a sheet and a piece of paper. They are here," and he brought forward a chair, a black cloth and a sheet of a newspaper. "There is nothing extraordinary about any of these articles except about my young assistant. And he will feel most extraordinary when he starts to vanish into thin air.

"The paper, as you can see, is the front page of your local publication, *The Herald,*" and the performer held up a sheet of paper. Every one in the audience could see that it was what it purported to be—at least on one side, and that was the only side held up to the crowd in the Opera House.

"This sheet of paper I will place on the stage," went on the professor, and he suited the action to the words. "On top of the paper I will place this chair, on which my young assistant is going to sit," and seemingly without any special preparation the magician set the chair on the paper, one leg being near each of the four corners of the sheet.

"Now if you will kindly take your seat in the chair, we shall proceed," said Mr. Crabb, otherwise Professor Rosello. Joe sat down, his heart beating a little faster than usual, for he wanted the trick to work perfectly, and much depended on him.

"Good-bye," said the professor with mock

solicitude, as he shook hands with Joe. "This is the last we shall see of you," and he pretended to be distressed. Several boys in the gallery shouted their farewells to Joe in laughing tones. He waved his hands to the audience, which was curiously expectant.

"I will now cover my assistant, chair and all with this sheet," said the professor. "I do that because the disappearance of a person sometimes is attended by painful scenes, and I do not wish to make you suffer. This sheet was once white," he went on, as he shook out a black cloth, turning it about so that both sides could be seen. There was nothing tricky about that, it was evident.

"It used to be white, but in traveling about the sheet lost its original color, and, as I do not carry a laundress with me, it has never been washed."

As a matter of fact the cloth had always been black. It had to be, so the audience could not see through it to witness the details of the trick.

"I will now cover my assistant in the chair with this white-black sheet," continued Professor Rosello, "and when I raise it he will be—gone!"

He draped the cloth over Joe's head and shoulders, letting it fall to the floor of the stage on all sides of the chair. He then took up his "pistol" wand, which fired a blank shot.

"Are you ready?" he called to Joe, after a dramatic pause.

"Ready," was the muffled reply.

"Then go!" cried the professor. He pointed his wand at the covered chair, there was a loud report, and a moment later, when the professor whisked the black sheet off the chair was empty. The professor lifted the sheet of paper from under the chair. Apparently there was not a break in it.

There was a gasp of astonishment from the crowd.

"You see," said the professor, bowing and smiling when the applause had subsided, "he has disappeared—vanished into thin air. I am glad it happened to none of you, though of course I might be able to reincarnate you again, as——"

He appeared greatly astonished at the sight of some one in the back of the theatre.

"Why, look who's here!" he cried, pointing with his wand. "My young assistant has not waited for me to call him back to life. He came of himself."

The audience turned to behold Joe calmly walking down the middle aisle, and up the stage by means of the temporary steps which the professor used to descend and ascend.

There was more applause at Joe's unexpected appearance in this fashion, and the trick made a big hit.

And now to let you into the secret.

The trick consisted of several parts. A trap-door was in the stage through which Joe could dis-

appear. This trap, directly under the chair and paper, was operated by a theatre employee, who of course would not tell, at least beforehand, how the trick was done. After Joe had gone down through the trap, into the room that exists under all theatrical stages, it was an easy matter for him to slip out through the stage door, run around an alley, and enter the front of the theatre, to walk calmly down the aisle.

But how could he disappear through the seat of the chair, and through the sheet of paper, without making a break, at least in the paper?

There was a trick about the paper, although it seemed to be perfectly ordinary. It was a sheet from the local paper, but it had been prepared in advance by the professor. On the back was pasted a square of cardboard, a quarter of an inch smaller each way than the trap-door in the stage. This paper trap, for such it was, was divided in the middle, the two flaps being hinged to the sheet of newspaper. The reason the cardboard did not show when held up to the audience was that the whole sheet of newspaper was double, one half being folded over the cardboard trap.

When Professor Rosello laid the paper down in the stage he was guided by certain small marks, so that it went exactly over the trap in the floor. This trap was hinged at the back, opening downward, but kept in place when not in use by a strong

iron bar underneath. Next he placed the chair over the piece of paper, the legs going into exact positions previously marked on the paper, but the marks were too small to be seen by the audience.

The object in placing the paper on the stage was to get the audience to believe that there was no hole in the wooden floor through which Joe could disappear, it being the natural inference that such was the method used. But when the crowd saw what they thought was the unbroken sheet of paper, they would not suppose Joe had gone down through that, as he really had.

The chair was also a trick one. The seat of it was on hidden hinges so it could be lifted up and folded back. There were also secret springs on it which, when released, shot out and extended certain thin steel projections, which distended the black sheet into such shape that they made the rough outline of a person sitting on the chair.

When Joe took his seat on the chair, under cover of the black cloth, he pressed the secret springs, and a ring appeared above his head to support the black cloth, exactly as if it were supported by his head. Other projections appeared at his knees, and as the bottom of the cloth was arranged by the professor some distance away from the legs of the chair, Joe was as if he were under a sort of tent, held out and away from him, so he could move about a little without being seen.

As soon as he was covered, and had worked the secret springs, he lifted up the false seat of the chair, supporting himself by his hands on the framework, into which the seat fitted.

This seat Joe carefully folded back, taking care to make no noise and not to disturb the black cloth all around him. Meanwhile the professor had with his foot given a rap on the floor of the stage. This was a signal to the man below to open the trap in the floor.

Joe, hidden under the black cloth, felt for the opening in the floor with his feet. A stepladder was hurriedly put into place by the stage-hand, and Joe lowered himself down through the chair, the prepared hole in the paper and the hole cut in the stage, to the ladder.

The ladder was quickly taken away, the stage-hand reached up and lowered the seat of the chair back in place, Also, when this had been done he closed the trap-door in the stage, and the newspaper with its trap was in place above it, seemingly unbroken.

Then the professor fired the shot and whisked off the black cloth, as he did so touching the secret springs, so that the projections snapped back out of sight, and when the cloth was lifted off the chair looked as it did at first, only Joe was not on it.

Then he came running down the aisle, and persons who suspected that he had gone down through

the stage did not know what to make of the piece of newspaper. It did not fit their theory.

That paper, appeared to be an ordinary sheet, and no one, or at least very few, would have thought of a trap being cut in that.

And thus was the "disappearing" trick worked.

"Very good! You did splendidly!" said the professor in a low voice as Joe came up on the stage. "It went off to perfection!"

After Joe made his bow in acknowledgment of the applause he received for his part in the trick, he prepared for the next "experiment," as the professor often called his acts.

That first night of Joe's assistance went off well, a number of acts being done after the "disappearance," all being well received.

"A very satisfactory evening," remarked Professor Rosello, as he and Joe went to their boarding house, after having put away their apparatus. "I hope we shall do as well the two remaining nights."

"So do I," agreed Joe.

He was very tired, for he had not rested well in the freight car, but a good night's sleep made him feel like a new person.

CHAPTER XV

INVOKING THE LAW

WHILE Joe Strong was thus making his first public appearance as a wizard, or, rather, as a magician's assistant, quite different scenes were being enacted in his home town and at his former residence.

Deacon Blackford had discovered the fire, found out that he had been robbed, and noted the disappearance of Joe. With these facts confronting himself and his wife, the deacon at once began to act.

"What you going to do?" asked Mrs. Blackford, as he dressed for the street.

"I'm going out," he answered grimly.

"What! At this time of night?"

"Can't help it," was the reply. "I'm going to get the law after him."

"You mean Joe?"

"I don't mean anybody else! He robbed me and you, and he's got to take the consequences! I'm going to look for the constables. Joe can't have gone very far. I saw him jumping out of the

window, but at the time I didn't know who it was. He robbed me, and he set fire to the place."

"But he didn't mean to do *that,*" said Mrs. Blackford defensively. "According to your tell, he accidentally kicked the lamp with his foot."

"Accident or no accident, he did it, and I'm going to have the law on him! I'll get the constables. He's took a lot of money, and papers worth more. He may have been in league with those rascals, Denton and Harrison," murmured the deacon. "But, no. I don't hardly believe that. He didn't know them. He just did this out of natural badness. Couldn't expect much else from the son of a circus performer and a worker of the black art."

He spoke harshly and angrily.

"Maybe there's *some* good circus women, and men too, for that matter, Deacon," said his wife softly.

"No, not one—they're all dishonest!" Mr. Blackford declared. "But I'll get the law after Joe."

He made ready for the street, though it was a most unusual hour for Deacon Blackford to be out. But the occasion was unusual.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," he told his wife.

Out into the night went the deacon, his brain rather in a whirl over the recent events. He walked down the silent streets, his footsteps echoing loudly. He headed for the center of the town where the police station was located, for the two constables

reported at this place once or twice during the night.

Hen Sylvester and Tim Donovan had been having adventures of their own in chasing Joe. But they had missed him, and when they saw him fling himself, rather rashly, into the open freight car, which quickly bore him away from them, they turned back much chagrined.

"He got away!" exclaimed Hen.

"That's what he did," agreed his companion officer. "I wonder who he was? I wish we could have caught him. He was a burglar."

"That's right," chimed in Hen. "Now we'll have to go back to town, and find out who was robbed."

Back to the police station went the two constables, panting somewhat after their fruitless run. They reached the lockup about the same time Deacon Blackford did. There were no prisoners in the jail then, so the services of a watchman were temporarily dispensed with.

Hen and Tim saw a figure walking along the street near the little building that contained a few cells. Their previous experience had made them suspicious of any one abroad at this hour.

"There's another one of 'em!" exclaimed Hen.

"Another who?" asked his fellow officer.

"Burglar. We'll get him. Come on!"

Determined that this second midnight prowler

should not get away the two constables made a rush for him.

"We've got you!" cried Hen.

"Surrender!" yelled Tim, drawing his revolver.

"Here! Let me go! What does this mean?" cried Joe's foster-father.

At the sound of his voice the two constables released their holds and stepped back.

"Deacon Blackford!" they gasped.

"That's who I am," was the response. "But what does this mean?"

"We—we took you for a burglar," explained Hen. "We chased one a while ago, and missed him, and we were suspicious when we saw you."

"What are you doing out so late?" asked Tim.

"I came to report a robbery."

"Where?" asked both officers eagerly.

"At my house. I've been robbed of some money and valuable papers. Some of my wife's money was also taken."

"What did I tell you!" wailed Hen Sylvester. "I knew that burglar who got away took something! If we had only caught him!"

"Did you see him?" quickly inquired the deacon.

"Yes, but we couldn't see his face—couldn't tell who he was," explained Tim.

"I can tell you who he was!" announced the deacon, importantly.

"You?" gasped both constables.

"Yes! He was Joe Strong!"

"Joe Strong? What! Not your——"

"My foster-son," broke in the deacon. "I regret to say that he has run away with money and valuable papers belonging to me. I want him arrested. I'll swear out a warrant in the morning. But if you look for him now you may find him. Arrest him on sight!"

"No use looking now," said Hen, despondently.

"Why not?"

"Because he took the midnight freight. We saw him jump into an empty car as the train was pulling out of the station. I knew he must have been up to some mischief, or he wouldn't have run the way he did."

Then Tim and Hen, by turns, told of their fruitless chase after Joe.

"We didn't know who he was until you told us," said Hen to the deacon, "but we suspected he was a burglar. Did he get much?"

The deacon told the details of the robbery, the fire and its extinguishment, and how he had set out to invoke the law on his runaway foster-son.

"I want him arrested and locked up," he told the constables.

"We'll have to catch him first," said Tim, with a shake of his head, "and there's no telling where he might jump off the freight. We'll have to send out posters with his picture on, same as the regular

police do. Were you thinking of offering a reward?" he asked.

"No," answered the deacon. "At least not yet. We'll try to catch him without one first. Later on—well, I'll see."

There was nothing more to be done that night, and in the morning Deacon Blackford swore out a warrant for Joe's arrest.

CHAPTER XVI

THE SMASHED WATCH

EVEN larger crowds than attended on the first evening, greeted Joe Strong and Professor Rosello at the two following performances. The wonder of the disappearing trick, as well as the marvels of others, had been well spread throughout Lorilard by the small boys, and by grown persons as well, and many bought tickets determined to "see how it was done."

But the stage-hand who let Joe down through the trap in the floor kept his own counsel, and though many persons said they were sure they knew how the feat was performed and that Joe *must* go down through the stage, since it was obvious he did not go up in the air, still they could not understand how the piece of paper was not broken.

"Well, you certainly brought me good luck," said the professor to Joe at the conclusion of the third night's performance. "We took in good money. You have more than earned your salary."

"I'm glad to know that," answered Joe, much gratified. "Do you think I shall succeed as a magician?"

"I'm sure of it! You learn quickly, and you have natural and inherited ability. Practice will make you perfect. I will help you all I can."

Joe had worked much more smoothly the third night than on either of the two previous ones. The "disappearance" trick had gone off well, and the professor had let Joe do one or two simple mystification acts himself.

"As we go along I will gradually let you do more and more on the stage," said Professor Rosello, "until you get so you can sometimes take my place."

"You are very kind," returned Joe.

"I should think I ought to be," the magician went on. "I owe my life to you, and it will take a good while to pay that debt."

During the next few weeks Joe traveled about from town to town with Professor Rosello, helping him in many ways aside from on the stage. For there were many details to look after in hiring theatres, sending on posters in advance, transporting the baggage and so on.

Joe's work was so successful, and his working of what tricks he did so smooth, that Professor Rosello let him take a certain specified part in the performances now.

"We'll add some new tricks, too," said the magician. "I can afford to do that now, as we are taking in a good deal of money."

So some new apparatus was bought, and a young

man, or rather an overgrown boy, hired to relieve Joe of some of the detail work. Thus Joe could devote more time to the tricks and to practice. The professor's "show" was not a large one, and he did not play in the big cities, or, if he did, it was in the small theatres or in halls. But Joe was in good company, and he was getting valuable experience. He often wondered what was going on in Bedford, and whether his disappearance had caused any stir.

It had. The robbery at the deacon's house became known, and also the fact of the accusation against Joe, who was being sought by the police.

"Well, Joe may have run away, because he couldn't stand it any longer," said Tom Simpson, when he found his suit of clothes and the note the morning after Joe had left them on the doorstep. "Joe Strong may have run away, but he never stole!"

"That's right!" agreed his other chums.

But of all this Joe knew nothing.

The young wizard, which he was rapidly becoming in earnest, kept at his chosen work. He practiced sleight-of-hand at every opportunity. Nor did he neglect his physical welfare. In many of the places he visited there were Y. M. C. A. gymnasiums, and there Joe paid a small fee for the privilege of using the trapeze or the bars. This he did during the day, while waiting for the night's

performance. He would end his exercise with a shower bath, and be in fine trim for the evening's work. He did the disappearing trick every night of the show, and it always went well.

Joe also did considerable studying, for the professor had a number of books on magic. And one evening after a successful performance Joe approached Professor Rosello, and said:

"I think I have invented a new trick."

"Good!" exclaimed the professor. "Let's hear about it."

"I say *think*," Joe reminded him, "for, though I haven't seen you do it, you may know about it."

He then described the feat, explaining what apparatus would be necessary to have it properly worked.

"Say, that's a good one!" cried Professor Rosello. "It's great, Joe! And I'll let you do it yourself, as is your right. I'll order what you want, and you can practice it, for remember this: a new trick requires lots of practice to make it run smoothly. There's nothing worse for a magician's reputation than to have a slip-up when he is working a piece of magic. So practice the new trick well."

Joe promised that he would, and when the three simple pieces of apparatus were received he devoted much time to perfecting the details of his little bit of mysticism.

The evening came on which Joe was to do his

new trick. The ones the professor did were successfully worked, and while Mr. Crabb went behind the scenes to "load" himself for his next act, Joe stepped forward, and, addressing the audience, said:

"For this trick I should like to borrow a gold gentleman's watch—I should say a gentleman's gold watch." The audience laughed at his pretended slip, and this is always a good beginning. There was a moment's hesitation, and Joe added: "I will return it safely. Come now, can't I get one gold watch from some one in this large and intelligent-looking audience? Ah, thank you, here is a trusting gentleman," and he accepted a gold watch which a man in the front row held up. He was not a confederate. Joe had never seen him before, but he took this watch because it was an open-faced one, of just the size he wanted.

"Now before I go on with this trick," resumed Joe, as he took his place in the center of the stage, "I will, for safe keeping, place the watch in this paper bag." He held up what seemed to be an ordinary paper bag such as grocers use. The watch went into it, and Joe then twisted the bag up around the watch, the paper assuming a circular form, the shape of the watch being plainly visible.

"I'll just lay the watch, in the bag, on the floor here for a moment," the young wizard went on. "It

will be perfectly safe, I'm sure. I just want to ask a few questions of the owner."

Joe then went through some "patter" improvised for the occasion, asking the man who had lent him the watch, how long he had had it, whether it kept good time, if it were valuable, and so on.

In the midst of this talk Joe walked about, and then, seemingly by accident, he stepped on the paper bag. There was an instant crunch as if of a broken crystal, and a gasp came from the audience. The man who owned the watch looked rather startled.

"Dear me! This is quite too bad!" exclaimed Joe, stooping to pick up the paper bag and the stepped-on watch. "I am very sorry, sir, but you know accidents will happen. You should have warned me that I was going to step on your watch, my dear sir."

"I—I—you——" began the man, rather red in the face.

"Keep still!" his wife cautioned him. "It's only a trick, you know."

The man became silent, but wore a worried look.

"Well, let us see just how bad the damage is," Joe went on. He took the watch from the bag and held it up. The crystal was cracked in all directions, and a slight pressure from Joe's thumb sent it into fragments of glass.

"Oh, dear! Worse and worse!" Joe exclaimed. "Well, since I have broken this much of the watch,

I might as well finish it. I'll put it in this mortar," and he brought forward a small wooden one, shaped as all druggists' mortars are.

"There's nothing in it, you see," he went on holding it so the audience could look into the interior. "Quite empty," and Joe rattled his wand inside. "So it can't hurt your watch to go in there." He shook the fragments of glass on the now smoothed-out paper bag, and carefully lowered the watch, with its back toward the audience, into the mortar.

"Now we'll see what we can do," Joe went on, taking up the pestle. This, as you know, is the object with which a druggist grinds up in the mortar any medicine requiring crushing.

"We'll make a thorough job of this while we're at it," Joe went on, as he proceeded to grind away with the pestle on the bottom of the mortar.

"Come! This is too slow. I shall have to use something heavier, I think, to make mince-meat of this watch. It is a very tough one. I'll use this poker," and he picked up an iron one, laying aside the pestle on a table. With the poker Joe jabbed away at the bottom of the mortar, wherein, a few moments previous, the audience had seen him place the watch.

A rattling, grinding sound was heard, a clink of metal, and Joe exclaimed:

"Ah, now we are getting on famously! You

will hardly know your watch again, my dear sir. It is all in pieces."

The man did not seem to know whether to look amused or angry.

"There we are!" Joe exclaimed, as he held the mortar slantingly so the audience could look inside. They, as well as the gentleman who had lent the watch, saw the crushed and bent wheels, springs and pinions of a watch, all massed together.

"Well, I couldn't do much worse to your watch. I think you'll agree to that, my dear sir?" said Joe to the man.

"That's right," he admitted, rather ruefully.

"And now to try what a little magic will do," said Joe. "Since I have destroyed your watch, I'll do my best to restore it."

He poured from the mortar the fragments of a watch, putting them on the paper bag together with the pieces of glass. He then wadded them all up together, and crammed them into the mouth of a large, old-fashioned pistol.

"Now watch me closely," Joe said.

And one may well believe the audience, as well as the man who owned the watch, did watch.

CHAPTER XVII

JOE LEARNS SOMETHING

THE young wizard made a few "magical" passes in the air over the pistol he held up in front of the audience, which was now keyed up to a point of nervous anticipation. The man whose watch had been borrowed was half out of his seat. He seemed about to protest against the liberties being taken with his property, but his wife, cooler headed than he, whispered to him:

"It's all right. You'll get your watch back."

"But how can I when he——"

"Hush!" she cautioned him.

"If agreeable to you," went on Joe, smiling, "I will fire the fragments of the watch from this pistol, and cause it to appear, whole, reunited and undamaged, in that flower."

As he spoke he aimed the pistol at a small, potted, flowering plant on a table at the back of the stage.

"I'll cause the watch to appear hanging from a pink ribbon among the roots of that plant. And here is the ribbon I will use," and Joe rammed

down the barrel of the pistol a small length of silk ribbon which he picked up from a table near him.

He aimed his weapon at the plant and fired. There was the usual jumping and screaming from some of the women in the audience, as Joe walked over to the plant. In plain view of the audience he lifted it, roots, earth and all from the pot, and there, as he had said, dangling from a pink ribbon, was a watch.

"I believe this is your property, sir," he said to the man who had lent the timepiece, and Joe detached it, ribbon and all, from a short branch of the plant over which the ribbon was looped.

"Is it your watch?" Joe asked.

"Why—er—yes, it is! But I don't see how in the world you made it whole again."

"That's one of the secrets of magic," returned Joe, smiling, and bowing to the applause that followed. His trick had been a great success, as he had hoped.

Professor Rosello now came on the stage to work one of his feats, and Joe retired to get ready for his part in it. And while he is doing that the explanation of the watch trick will be given.

It stands to reason that no one can take a perfectly good watch, step on it, break the crystal, beat it to pieces, ram it into a pistol and by firing it at a plant cause the timepiece to appear whole again among the roots. This is how it is done.

In the first place Joe had provided himself with the following articles for his trick: A paper bag, ordinary, except that inside it were some small lumps of hard sugar, held from rattling about by small strips of paper pasted over them. Also on one side of the bag was pasted a triangular piece of paper forming a sort of pocket, which was not visible when the bag was quickly held up in front of the audience. In a secret pocket of his suit Joe had a watch crystal which had been scored in crisscross fashion by a diamond, so that it appeared to be cracked in every direction. The cuts made by the diamond were so deep in the glass that a slight pressure would cause the crystal to break into scores of pieces.

The other piece of apparatus was a trick mortar and pestle. The mortar had a false inside bottom which fitted closely but not too tightly. Below this bottom Joe had placed, beforehand, the fragments of a cheap watch—wheels, springs and so on.

The pestle was also a trick one. In the large end there was a hollow, large enough to hold a watch, and the opening was closed by a piece of wood exactly the same shape and size as the false inside bottom of the mortar. The end of the pestle and the bottom of the mortar were interchangeable.

The pistol Joe used was the regular stage kind. That is it had two barrels. Into the larger the objects, in this case the fragments of a watch, were

placed. The other barrel fired a light charge of powder.

The flowering plant was a real one—there was no trick about that except that the earth around the roots had been previously made loose, so it would pull up easily.

Joe, with all these things, was ready for his trick. He borrowed the watch and placed it in the paper bag.

That is, he seemed to do so, but, in reality, he slipped it into the little outside triangular pocket he had pasted there for it. He could now hold the bag up, with the side containing the watch away from the audience, and, as he showed both hands empty, every one thought the watch was in the bag. It was, in a sense.

Joe then twisted the bag up, making it conform to the shape of the watch, and when this point was reached he quietly slipped the watch out from the pocket into his hand, cleverly "palming" the timepiece. With the watch safe in his hand, he laid the bag on the floor of the stage. The paper still retaining its round shape, and no one suspected that the watch was not in it.

Then Joe stepped on the paper bag. Of course it sounded as if he had broken the watch crystal, but, in reality, what the audience heard was the crunching of the lumps of sugar.

Joe pretended to be much exercised as he picked

up the bag, and as he did this, he slipped the watch into his secret pocket, and managed to put over its glass face the crystal he had previously prepared by scoring and criss-crossing with the diamond. When this was done Joe again palmed the real watch, but now it had over its face a glass that seemed to be cracked in all directions.

Reaching his hand, in which the watch was palmed, inside the bag, Joe seemingly brought out the cracked watch. Again he manifested much concern, and more so when a pressure of his thumb really broke the prepared glass.

Then he was ready for the mortar and pestle part of the trick. He put the fragments of glass on the paper bag, and lowered the watch, with its back toward the audience, into the pestle. This was done so that no one would see that the crystal was still whole and uncracked, which was the case.

The real watch was now in the mortar, but it did not actually rest on the bottom. Instead it rested on the false piece of wood, and beneath this wood, in a hollowed-out place, were the pieces of a cheap watch.

As Joe looked down into the pestle, as though to see that the watch was all ready to be pounded up, he "palmed" off the false head of the pestle. This left that instrument with a hollow head, inside which would fit the real watch, to be concealed from

view by the loose false bottom of the mortar, when the pestle was lifted.

Joe now put the pestle into the mortar, slipping the opening in the pestle over the watch and false bottom, and by a slight rotary motion causing the false bottom of the mortar to fit itself into the pestle and stick there. The real watch was now concealed in the hollow head of the pestle, while the fragments of the cheap watch were exposed in the bottom of the mortar.

Joe now pretended that the pestle was not strong enough to smash up the watch as he wanted it, and used a poker. He laid the pestle on the table, which was a signal for the boy assistant to take it out behind the scenes. And while he had the pestle there the boy took out the real watch, quickly tied a pink ribbon through the ring, and then, going to one of the curtains, in which was a slit, he reached through this slit and suspended the ribbon on a short branch of the flower, letting it hang down out of sight behind the pot. Of course the audience did not see this, for the folds of the curtain concealed the slit. Besides, all eyes were on Joe.

The young wizard had now gotten the real watch just where he wanted it, on the plant, where he could "produce" it whenever he wanted to. But the trick was not yet finished. Joe ground away with the poker at the pieces of the cheap watch already in the pestle. He then showed the pieces to the au-

dience, poured them out on the paper bag, where the pieces of glass already were. The whole was then wadded up, put into the trick pistol, and the rest was a mere matter of detail. Joe walked over, picked up the pot, pulled the plant up by the roots, the watch of course seeming to have been down in the dirt. And, naturally, the watch was not in the least damaged, though it seemed to have gone through all sorts of misfortunes.

The real secret of the trick, aside from the sleight-of-hand work necessary, lay in the prepared paper bag and the mortar and pestle, which were made for just such mystification as this.

"It went very well, Joe," said the professor, at the conclusion of the performance. "That little piece of ribbon added to it." For Joe had thought to put into the pistol a bit of ribbon such as that by which the watch was suspended. Otherwise he could not have accounted for the piece on the ring of the watch.

"Do you think they liked it?" Joe asked.

"I'm sure they did. You may do that trick at each place where we perform. And if you can work up any new ones, do so."

"I will!" promised Joe, much delighted with his progress.

Inventing new tricks is not as easy as might be supposed, and for the next few days Joe suggested feats to Professor Rosello only to have them re-

fused as not being effective enough or as too old. But Joe was not discouraged.

At a performance one night in the town of Cardiff, Joe had occasion to walk down among the audience to exhibit some pieces of apparatus, to show that there was nothing concealed about it. As he passed one row of seats he was surprised to hear a boyish voice say:

"Hello, Joe!"

He looked around and saw Harry Martin, one of his chums from Bedford.

"Why, hello, Harry!" Joe ejaculated. "What in the world are you doing here?"

"I'm visiting my uncle who lives here. But I never expected to see you in a show like this. I never was so surprised as when you came out on the stage. I couldn't believe my eyes."

"Oh, I've been with the professor some time," said Joe quickly. "Ever since I—er—I came away from home. But come back of the scenes after the show, Harry. I'd like to have a talk with you."

"And I with you, Joe. I want to tell you I don't believe what they are saying about you, either."

"Saying about me, Harry?"

"Yes. I'll tell you later."

Joe was puzzled as he went on with the trick, and he eagerly awaited the advent of his chum behind the scenes after the show was over.

"What is it they're saying about me, Harry?"

asked the young wizard. "Do they blame me for leaving a home I couldn't stand any longer?"

"Not that so much, Joe. But don't you know you are accused of robbing Deacon Blackford and setting fire to his place?"

"What?" cried Joe. "You don't mean that!"

"Yes I do," said Harry. "I mean that's what you're accused of, but I don't believe it!"

Joe sank into a chair.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MAGIC EGG

"Don't take it so to heart, Joe," begged Harry, after a moment's pause. "I didn't mean to spring it on you this way. I thought maybe you knew something about it."

"I didn't know a thing!" exclaimed Joe. Professor Rosello and the boy helper were busy putting away their apparatus, so Joe and Harry could talk together for a time. "How did they come to accuse me?" Joe asked, after a pause.

"Well, you ran away, you know," began Harry. "Of course that wasn't so bad, considering what you had to put up with. And the same night you went off, the deacon was robbed."

"Of much?"

"To hear him tell it you'd think it was. About a hundred dollars of his money and nearly forty dollars of his wife's."

"She kept hers in the clock and his was in the desk," said Joe.

"Better not let any one else hear you say that," Harry cautioned him.

"Why not?"

"Because they'll only be more suspicious of you, seeing you knew where the money was kept."

"Oh, that isn't anything. I couldn't very well help knowing, being in the house all the while. But was anything else taken?"

"Yes, some valuable papers."

"And what about a fire?" asked Joe.

"Well, the deacon says he heard a noise, got up to see what it was, and saw some one getting out of the window near his desk. Whoever it was kicked over the lamp, which exploded. The deacon says he knows you didn't mean to start the fire."

"What made him think it was I getting out the window?"

"He didn't—that is, not at the time. But when he went to call you, and found you weren't in your room, then he jumped to the conclusion that you had taken the money and papers and climbed out of the window."

"I didn't do either," Joe said. "I went out the door in a hurry when I heard the deacon after me. That is, I thought I heard him. I'm beginning to believe now it was the noise made by the real burglars that frightened me. But is that all the evidence they have against me?"

"No, Hen Sylvester and Tim Donovan saw you running away in the middle of the night, and jump

the midnight freight. They chased after you and fired some shots, but you wouldn't stop."

"By Jove! That's right!" cried Joe. "That *will* look suspicious."

"Then you *did* run away from them?" asked Harry.

"Yes, but not because I had robbed the deacon. I was late for the freight. You see it pulled out earlier than usual because there wasn't so much of the fireworks to load, on account of the fire. I didn't want to miss it, and I ran. I wouldn't stop when the constables called to me. Yes, that sure will look suspicious;" and Joe shook his head.

"But we don't believe you did it," said Harry. "Tom, Charlie, Henry and I will stick to you, Joe."

"Thanks. Did Tom get his suit all right?"

"Oh, yes. But I sure was surprised when I saw you come out on the stage to-night. We hadn't any idea where you'd gone, though Deacon Blackford said he guessed you'd join some circus."

"This isn't quite a circus," said Joe. "But I like it," and then he told his chum his experiences since joining his fortunes with those of Professor Rosello.

"Say, it's great!" cried Harry, with sparkling eyes. "I wish I were a magician."

"Oh, I'm not one yet," replied Joe. "It takes a lot more experience than I've had. But I'm learning. How did you like the show?"

"Fine! That watch trick of yours was a dandy. You didn't really smash the watch and put it together again, did you, Joe?"

"Of course not. There was a trick about it, but I don't feel at liberty to tell you how it's done. You see the trick, in a way, belongs to Professor Rosello."

"Oh, I don't want you to tell me. It would spoil it for me when I saw it again. I'm coming tomorrow night."

"Come on," urged Joe. "Here, I'll write you out a pass. It isn't often I get a chance to do that for a friend."

They were showing two nights in this particular town, and Professor Rosello gladly allowed Joe to give Harry a free ticket.

"Say, you're sure making out better than you ever would in Bedford, Joe," commented his chum, as they parted that evening.

"Yes, I couldn't stand it there. The deacon wasn't fair to me."

"Well, we boys miss you," Harry said.

"Give 'em my regards when you go back," Joe suggested, "and tell the deacon I never took his money."

"I sure will, Joe."

A few nights later, Joe, in his capacity as assistant, was helping the professor, who was doing an egg trick—balancing the egg on the end of a straw.

The straws were genuine ones, as were the eggs. The secret lay in a little piece of apparatus, so small as to be readily palmed almost before the very eyes of the audience. It consisted of a little celluloid cup, so shallow as to be almost flat, but concave enough to hold the end of an egg. There was a little stem, half an inch long, on the lower side of this celluloid cup.

After the professor had invited some one in the audience to make an egg stand up on end on the point of a straw, which the person, of course, could not do, the professor did it himself, deftly slipping the projection of the celluloid cup into the hollow of the straw. The egg then stood up in the little piece of celluloid, which, being the exact color of an egg and as thin as the shell, was never noticed.

As Joe watched this familiar trick being done, there came into his mind the idea for another one, even more simple, and requiring no apparatus whatever except an ordinary glass jar. He spoke to the professor about it the next day, and was given permission to work it.

Just before he "put on" his watch trick the next night, Joe announced that he would try a little experiment with an egg.

"You all know that a perfectly fresh egg will sink in water," he said. "In fact, that is a test for a fresh egg. Now I have here three perfectly good and fresh eggs. I know they are fresh because I

bought them this afternoon from your popular grocer, Mr. McCabe, and he told me he never sold any *but* fresh eggs."

There was a laugh at this, and every one turned to look at the grocer, who was in the audience, a fact that Joe knew, for he had really purchased the eggs at the grocery. Thus he had his audience with him at the start, a reference to a local personage from the stage by a traveling performer invariably producing an effect.

"Now as you all know," Joe went on, "a fresh egg sinks in water. You can prove it at home, and I'll prove it here for you. Just pick out any one of these eggs," he said, and, extending them on a plate to a woman in the audience, he took from her the egg she picked up.

"The lady looks like a good cook, she ought to know good eggs," said Joe, and again there was a laugh.

"Now I'll just put this egg in this jar of water," went on the young magician; "but instead of sinking, when I speak the magic word, it will remain floating half-way between the top of the water and the bottom of the jar. Now watch me closely."

Joe gently lowered the egg into the jar of water that stood on a table near him. Slowly the egg settled through the limpid fluid.

"By the magic of this wand, I command you to

stop!" cried Joe, as the egg was half-way down, and as he waved his stick the egg did stop midway.

"You see how easy it is," the young performer continued. "I did not touch the egg after I placed it in the water, nor did I approach the glass jar. You may examine both in a moment. I will now dissolve the magic spell I have cast about the egg. With my wand I make some passes—so——"

Joe put his wand into the water and stirred it about the egg, but did not touch it. In a second the egg slowly sank to the bottom of the jar, to the mystification of the audience.

"You may think there is some trick about it," said Joe. "But any one of you is at liberty to try and make the egg halt half-way down, as I did. Will you try it?" he said to the woman who had picked out the egg.

She blushed and shook her head.

"Then you, please," and Joe indicated a young man, who, sheepishly enough, came up on the stage. Joe handed him the jar of water, the young man reached down into it, got the egg and put it in the jar as Joe had done. But the egg at once sank to the bottom, and though the young man tried again, he had no success.

"You see, it's magic," laughed Joe, as he made ready for his smashed watch trick.

CHAPTER XIX

THE CIRCUS

AND now for the explanation of the egg trick. It is so simple that any of you may do it at home, with just an ordinary egg, a fruit jar and some salt. Don't forget the salt.

You have all heard the story, told to children, about putting salt on a bird's tail in order to tame it. Well, a fresh egg that one wishes to make float half-way submerged in a jar of water, must be treated in the same way. It must be salted.

Just as Joe said, a fresh egg will sink in water. But it will float in strong brine, or salt water, the reason being that salt water is denser, and has a greater specific gravity, than fresh water.

But the trick lies in combining fresh and salt water so that the egg will sink only half way.

Make a strong brine solution by dissolving common table salt in water. It may be necessary to experiment a little before getting the solution just the right strength. Fill a glass fruit jar, or any jar with a wide opening, half full of the brine. Now, with a funnel, pour fresh water in on top of

the salt water. Be careful not to let the two kinds of water mix. The salt water, being heavier, will be on the bottom of the jar, and the fresh, being lighter, on top. If you do it carefully enough, pouring in a little fresh water at a time, you will have, as Joe had, a jar with two layers of different kinds of water—one salt, the other fresh. The audience, of course, can not see this, as they could if you had two differently colored fluids, for the salt and fresh water are of the same color.

When Joe put the egg in the water he lowered it carefully, so as not to disturb the two water layers. The egg sank through the strata of fresh water, but when it came to the layer of dense, salt water, it would not sink in that, and came to a stop, half-way down, just as Joe, who knew at what point this would occur, uttered the command to stop.

And when Joe pretended to dissolve the "spell," he merely, with his wand, stirred together the fresh and salt water. This made a mixture of salt water, but it was not dense, or heavy, enough to support the egg, which of course sank to the bottom.

And, as the waters were well mixed when Joe let the young man try the experiment, of course the latter could not make the egg float as the boy wizard had done.

"That was a good trick, Joe," was the professor's compliment when Joe came off the stage. "In fact I think the simpler the trick is, the better, but there

are very few that can be worked with so little apparatus as your egg experiment. We'll keep that on our list."

Joe had told his employer about the news brought by Harry, to the effect that our hero was accused of robbery by his foster-parent.

"What are you going to do about it, Joe?" asked the professor.

"I don't see that I can do anything. I didn't take a dollar of his money, or Mrs. Blackford's either, nor did I touch the valuable papers. It's all a mistake, but I'm not going back there to tell him so. I sent word by Harry. If he won't believe him, he won't believe me."

"No, perhaps not. And, as you say, you can't go back there just to convince your foster-father. You don't think, do you, that he will make trouble for you?"

"I don't imagine so."

When Joe said this he knew nothing of the warrant having been sworn out for his arrest. Harry had not told his chum of this detail.

"Then I don't see that you need do anything," said Mr. Crabb. "I, myself, don't believe the accusation against you. And until you are put to some real trouble over it you may as well ignore it. We'll just go on as usual. You are doing well, and our show is succeeding better than I hoped for. I am glad you came to me."

Joe was grateful for this trust, and resolved to do his best in his future work. He worked up several new and simple tricks, many of them, such as dancing cards, the nodding skull and others, being adaptations from other stage illusions.

You have, most of you, perhaps, seen a magician suspend a card, apparently in mid-air, and cause it to go up or down as some one in the audience requests. Sometimes a metal ball on a rod is used. These tricks are worked by means of a black thread which is attached to the card or ball and is pulled by a confederate behind the scenes.

Indeed, the black silk thread has been called the magician's best friend. It is absolutely invisible on the lighted stage against the proper background, and the right kind is strong enough to lift considerable weight.

A card chosen from the pack is made to rise or fall as follows: The magician gets possession of the card selected by some one in the audience, either by keeping his finger in the place in the pack into which it is thrust, or by "forcing" a certain card on the person in the audience. The performer knows what card he is going to "force" and, later, can readily pick it out of the pack as he shuffles it. To "force" a card, the operator rapidly spreads out a pack of cards, face down, in front of a person, and quickly thrusts one card out farther than the others, literally "forcing" it into the hand. It is a

predetermined card, but not one in a hundred realizes that.

At any rate, having the card, the performer goes back to the stage and adroitly contrives to fasten the card to the unseen black silk thread with a tiny bit of beeswax. Then, with the card apparently suspended in mid-air, but in reality hung by an unseen thread, which runs through screw-eyes on the stage floor, the card is made to go up or down or stop midway, just as the audience calls for, by the pulling of the thread by the assistant behind the scenes. When the trick is over the performer slyly takes the card off the pellet of wax, no trace of which shows, and passes the card around for examination. Of course it is an ordinary card. The trick was all in the string.

Joe made a variation of that trick by using a round-bottomed little papier-maché figure, bought in a toy store. There was no trick about the figure. It was one of those which can not be made to lie down, but continually bob up, because of a weight of lead in the rounded bottom.

Joe laid a glass shelf across the backs of two chairs, and after passing the little round-bottomed figure about for inspection, returned with it to the stage, placing it on the glass shelf.

"This little figure, by bowing to the right or to the left, will now answer questions without assistance from me," Joe announced. "A bow to the

left will mean 'no,' and a nod to the right will mean 'yes.' Or you may have it the other way if you like. Which shall it be?"

The choice being thus left to the audience it seems impossible that there can be any prearrangement.

"Right bow for 'no,'" some one called.

"Very well," agreed Joe, smiling. "It's all the same to me. A bow to the right will stand for 'no,' and the nod to the opposite direction will mean 'yes.'"

All this while the little figure rested on the glass shelf. Not a bit of mechanism was to be observed, and Joe walked down from the stage and stood in the audience after placing the figure on the glass.

"Now we will ask questions," announced the young performer. "Is the lady on my right married?"

"No," nodded the figure.

"Is she willing to be?" he went on, amid laughter, while the young lady blushed.

"Yes," nodded the figure, amid still heartier laughter.

Joe asked many other questions, easily answered by no or yes. He did not take the trouble to find out if the answers were correct. The questions followed one another quickly, and the audience was interested in noting the movements of the figure, with no one on the stage, with Joe far away from it,

and with nothing but a plain glass shelf on which the figure rested.

When Joe had caused enough fun and mystification with this trick, he walked back to the stage, picked up the figure and tossed it to a little boy in a front seat.

"Take it home with you, youngster," he said. "See if you can make it behave as I did."

Several interested ones around the boy examined the figure. There was no deception about it, and the giving of it away proved this. In fact Joe found that a good climax to the trick.

And now—how was it done?

Beforehand two black threads were passed from behind the scenes up through the rounds of the chairs, over the backs and up on the glass shelf, where they met in the middle, each thread ending in a little pellet of wax. When Joe apparently carelessly placed the figure on the glass shelf he fastened one of the waxed ends of thread to either side of the half-rounded bottom.

He then went entirely away from the stage, and all that remained was for the assistant behind the scenes to pull one thread to make the figure bow to the right, and another to cause it to nod to the left. Of course the assistant heard all that was said, and could govern himself according to the choice of the audience. It was an effective trick, and beautifully simple. You might even try

it yourself, but be sure the black threads do not show. It is for this reason that most magicians have dark draperies for a stage background.

"Where do we go next?" asked Joe of the professor the night after he had first introduced his magic figure trick, which had gone so well with the audience.

"Hillsburg is the next town, and we ought to make quite some money there, Joe.

"You deserve more money," proceeded Mr. Crabb, "and I am going to give it to you. You are certainly a valuable addition to my show, and in time you will be able to carry on a whole performance yourself. You still have something to learn in palming, in making substitutions, and in manipulating cards. But that takes practice and time. I have great hopes of you."

But alas for the hopes of doing a good business in Hillsburg! When they reached that town, they found that a circus was playing there on the same date as Professor Rosello's show.

"No use trying to compete with a circus," observed the professor, as he heard the news at the small hotel where they put up. "We'll just wait over a couple of days, Joe, and perhaps we can think up some new tricks in the meanwhile. A rest will do us no harm. I'll just cancel to-day's engagement here, and put the show on two nights later. By that time we can get a crowd."

"Then you haven't anything for me to do?"

"No, Joe."

"I guess, then, I'll go out and see them get ready for the circus. I may take in the show, too."

"Please yourself, Joe," said the professor, as his young helper went out. "I didn't think he could resist the attraction of the sawdust rings of a circus," he murmured to himself with a smile.

CHAPTER XX

SOME TRAPEZE TRICKS

JOE did not have to ask his way to the circus grounds. He had only to follow the crowd, mostly made up of small boys, though with a goodly sprinkling of young men, all of whom were stringing their way out to the big, vacant lots where the tents were being put up, and where the big cages, wagons, horses, and animals were getting ready for the parade that was to follow.

"They'll likely have the horse and animal tents up by this time," mused Joe, "but I can see 'em fixing the main top."

The largest tent, or the one where the performance is given, is called in circus language the "main top."

Joe knew something of circuses from having read of them and having seen one or two, but also he remembered a very little, and seemed, too, to have inherited a certain knowledge.

It would have been strange had he not had a hankering for a tent show, for the son of Madame Hortense, one of the greatest circus riders of her

day, ought to have something of a liking for that strange life.

"I wonder if, by any chance, I'd meet some one who used to know my mother," mused Joe, as he walked onward. "It isn't so very many years ago that she was with a show, and there might be some old-time performers who would know her. But it's hardly likely, though possible. Of course my father, having been mostly in theatre shows, wouldn't be so apt to know circus people. Say, it almost makes me want to be with 'em!" Joe murmured enthusiastically, as he came in sight of the circus lots on which lively scenes were being enacted.

Men were running about, straightening out the big folds of canvas, lacing up the parts of the big tent preparatory to raising it, for the "main top" comes in several sections for easier transportation. Gay banners were fluttering from the animal tent, already up, and from the one where the performers were to eat and dress.

Breakfast had already been served to the now busy workers; and from the wagons, on which were the big stoves, there arose appetizing odors, as a second meal was being gotten ready—a breakfast for the performers who did not have to get up as early as did the laborers. Most of the circus stuff had been brought from the railroad trains, and was on the grounds.

"I don't see how they ever straighten things out,"

mused Joe. But somehow it was done. Every one had a certain part to perform. And while one gang of men were putting up the tents, others were feeding the horses and other animals, and those in charge of the parade were getting that ready to march through the streets in order to entice the small boy and his parent to come to the show.

Joe strolled past the place where, outside one of the performers' tents, men were pasting paper on the hoops through which the riders would leap later. He did not stop to peer in at the animals, though many small boys were feasting their eyes on such glimpses of the sights as they could see. Joe did not care much for this.

"I wish I could see some of the trapeze and high wire fellows at practice," he mused. "I might pick up a few stunts myself."

Joe passed a place where some of the performers' trunks had been heaped up in readiness to be taken into the dressing tents. Near them stood a tall, slim, young fellow, of about Joe's age. He did not seem very muscular, and he was tugging away at a heavy trunk, which he could not move.

"Sha'n't I give you a hand?" asked Joe pleasantly. "That looks pretty heavy."

"It is," was the answer, given with a smile. "I ought to have some of the men help me, but they're all too busy. My trunk is under this one, and I

want to get at it. There's a hole in my suit I want to get mended before the show opens."

From that Joe knew the lad to be one of the performers.

"I guess I can get it down for you," said the young wizard, and with a heave of his powerful arms he lifted down the top trunk.

"My, but you're strong!" exclaimed the other, somewhat enviously.

"Strong is my last name," laughed Joe.

"Is it, really?"

"It sure is. Can I help you carry it to your dressing room?"

"Well, if you don't mind, it would be a favor. I generally have one of the men help me, but we're a bit late to-day, on account of a train wreck that held us up, and everybody is doing double work. My place is right over there," and he indicated the tent where he had his dressing room, or, rather, space, for all do not have separate rooms in a circus.

As Joe took hold of one end of the trunk he noticed that it bore, in big, white letters the words:

HUMAN FISH

Joe's face must have showed his surprise, for the circus lad noticed it, and with a laugh, said:

"It isn't an aquarium you're helping to carry. This just has my clothes and some other things

in it—the suit I wear—I'm the 'human fish,' you know."

"You are—a fish?"

"Yes. Turton's my right name, Benny Turton, but I'm billed as the 'human fish.' I do an act in a tank of water—swimming, diving, staying under a long time, picking coins up in my mouth and all that. It isn't a bad act they tell me.

"Last night I ripped the suit I wear—sort of fish-scale arrangement, you know, and I wanted to get it out of my trunk early, to have it mended. I'm much obliged to you," he went on, as Joe set his end of the trunk down in the dressing tent, which was now becoming thronged with other performers who were getting ready for the parade.

"Oh, you're welcome, I'm sure," Joe answered. "I guess I'll come and see you perform."

"I'd be glad to have you. Say, if you'd like to look about a bit now I can fix it up for you."

"I'd like to see the trapeze fellows at practice."

"All right. I'll speak to the ring-master. Oh, I say Jim—Jim Tracy!" called the "human fish" to a big, red-faced and black-mustached man who entered the tent just then.

"Hello, Ben, what is it now?" was the answer.

"Here's a friend of mine,' went on the "fish," with a smile. "His name is Strong. You ought to see him juggle trunks. He wants to watch the trapeze fellows doing some try-outs."

"All right, Ben. As long as he's a friend of yours it goes. Make yourself at home, Strong," went on the ring-master, "and if anybody asks you what you're doing, tell 'em Jim Tracy said it was all right. How you making out, Benny? Need any help?" His voice seemed to take on a kinder tone as he spoke to the rather frail looking lad.

"Oh, I'm all right now. He gave me a hand just when I needed it," and he nodded to Joe. "Got to get my suit mended, or I'll be full of water before my act's half over."

"That's right—don't spoil the act," admonished the ring-master. "It's too good to have that happen. Well, I've got about a thousand things to do. See you later," and with a nod to the two young men he hurried off.

"Now you can go about as you like," said Benny. "He's the head boss, and one of the owners of Sampson Brothers' Gigantic Aggregation of Circus and Hippodrome," said Ben with a laugh, as he quoted part of the show bills. "What he says goes!"

Benny Turton, the "human fish," had unlocked his trunk, and was taking out a queer suit, made, it seemed, of rubber, covered with shimmering green scales like those of a fish.

"This is supposed to be water-tight," Benny explained, "and it is, when it doesn't leak. I've got

to put a patch on one elbow," and he showed where a rip would let water in. "I mend it with a rubber cement," he added, "and it takes a little time to dry. That's why I was in a hurry to get at it. You'll see some of the trapeze men at work soon, I think. Come back when you're through watching them."

A little later Joe found himself in the main tent, which was now almost completely erected, and as soon as this had been done men began putting in place the trapezes, flying rings and other pieces of apparatus on which the acrobats performed their feats.

While this was going on a man came strolling in, and from the anxious orders he gave, and from the manner in which he watched the arranging of some of the trapezes, Joe surmised that he was one of the performers. He made sure of this a little later when the man swung himself up on the bar, tested it, and then began to go through a few simple exercises in his street clothes, as though to test the ropes and fastenings.

"All right," he called to the workmen. "That'll do."

"The Lascalla Brothers are mighty particular," murmured one of the workmen, as the performer went out.

"I should say so!" was the comment of another. Then Joe knew he had seen one of the most famous

of trapeze performers, whose name was in large letters on the bills.

One or two men questioned Joe's presence, but when he mentioned Jim Tracy he was made welcome.

Most of the trapezes were in place, and the workmen had gone to another part of the big tent. Joe strolled over toward one of the swinging bars.

"Say, wouldn't I like to try it just once!" he murmured. "I've never been on a real circus trapeze." He looked about him. No one seemed to be noticing him. "Here goes!" he exclaimed.

Lightly he sprang and grasped the bar. The feel of it seemed natural to his hands, and he felt his springy muscles contracting for the upward pull. He swung lightly to the bar, and sat there, moving to and fro.

Then, in a sort of reckless spirit Joe went through a number of evolutions, such as he had often practiced alone at home or in some chum's barn.

Joe was hampered by his street shoes and clothes from doing very much, but what he did he did well. Daring indeed were one or two of the feats he attempted, for there was no life net below him. He worked rapidly and then, giving a final swing on the bar he shot off it, turned a somersault, and landed on his feet on a pile of canvas some distance off.

"Say, that wasn't bad! Better work in a little of that new stuff to-day," said a voice behind Joe. The young wizard turned quickly to behold Jim Tracy looking at him.

"Hello! Oh, it's you, is it?" asked the ring-master. "Blessed if I didn't think it was one of our regular performers doing a try-out. Say, Ben didn't tell me you belonged to the profesh."

"I don't. That is I'm an assistant to Professor Rosello, a magician. I'm not a circus performer."

"Well, it's too bad you aren't," was the comment. "I've seen some good tricks on a trapeze, but you've got a few of your own. I don't s'pose you'd like to join the show, would you? I could use an extra trapeze and ring act. Now if you'd like to consider it, I'll make you an offer."

Joe's heart beat high for a moment. He was almost tempted to accept. Then he realized that he had not yet perfected himself in the working of magic, and he wanted to do this. So he shook his head.

"No, thank you," he said, gratefully. "I guess I'll stick to Professor Rosello for the present."

"Well, you know your own business best," answered the ring-master, "and I sure don't want to take you away from the man you're with. But if ever you think of joining a circus, why drop me a line. You'll find us——"

But the ring-master was suddenly interrupted.

"Oh, Jim!" cried a voice, and Joe turned to behold, what he afterward declared was, a "vision in pink," hurrying into the main tent. The "vision" was a young girl, with a laughing face, merry brown eyes and a vivacious manner.

"Oh, Jim!" she cried. "I am in *such* trouble!"

"Well now, Miss Helen, what's the trouble?" asked Jim in a good-natured voice, as though he were speaking to some child. "We sure will have to have it fixed for you."

"Oh, thank you, Jim," and the "vision" turned and gazed full at Joe.

Joe blushed.

CHAPTER XXI

ALMOST CAUGHT

"WELL, now, Miss Helen, what's the trouble?" asked the ring-master, while Joe continued to gaze at the "vision."

"Oh, I can't get any lump sugar for Rosebud, and you know he won't eat the other kind." Her lips pouted prettily, and then she smiled—Joe declared at him, though it may have been at both of them.

"No lump sugar, eh? Well, that sure *is* a calamity!" laughed Jim Tracy. "I'll have to see to that. Rosebud must have his sugar."

"If he doesn't, you know he won't do his tricks well," went on the girl, now smiling broadly. "Please get some for me, Jim."

"I sure will, if I have to rob the breakfast table! I'll be back in a minute," he added to Joe. "You might wait here."

Joe was perfectly willing to wait. He hoped the "vision" would return.

"Is he a new performer?" asked the girl, nodding and smiling at Joe, as she walked off with the ring-master.

"Well, no, not exactly, Miss Helen. I've made him an offer—I just had to, after I saw him doing some stunts on a trapeze—but he seems to think he likes magic better."

"Then he doesn't like our circus?" The girl stopped, and once more she pouted prettily.

"Oh, it isn't that, I assure you!" exclaimed Joe quickly. "But you see I am under some obligations to Professor Rosello, and I don't want to leave him in the middle of the season."

"That's right," chimed in Jim. "It's best to play fair. But come along, Miss Helen, and I'll see if I can rustle some sugar for Rosebud."

"Good-bye!" she called to Joe. "But I should think you'd like a circus better than doing those queer tricks. Though they *are* nice," she added, with a little nod.

The sun seemed to have gone under a cloud to Joe as she went out of the tent. Brightness had vanished.

"I—I almost wish I had taken his offer," mused the lad. "I wonder——" he paused as he remembered the flash of her brown eyes and her smile. "No, I'd better stick to the professor. Maybe—later——Oh, well, I'll have to think about it."

He walked about, looking at the preparations still going on to get the main tent in readiness for the show. He saw Jim coming back, alone.

"Did you get the sugar?" he asked the ring-master.

"Yes. Rosebud won't starve to-day."

"Who's Rosebud?"

"Her trick horse, and a dandy, too." Then, though Joe did not ask, Jim went on. "She's one of our biggest drawing cards. Her name is Helen Morton, but she's billed as Mademoiselle Mortonti. It looks better on paper."

"What does she do?" Joe found himself asking.

"Fancy riding, and on a trick horse. She makes Rosebud do all sorts of tricks—amuses the young folks, and some of the old ones too. She makes a great pet of her horse and gives him lump sugar as a reward. I generally have a supply on hand for her, but it must have got side-tracked on account of the mix-up. However, I found some for her.

"She's one of the finest little girls in the world," went on the ring-master earnestly. "We all love her. She's an orphan, but she doesn't lack friends. Some folks sort of look down on circus performers," went on Jim, with a flash of his eyes, "but I want to tell you, right now, that——"

"You don't need to tell *me* anything," said Joe in a low voice. "My mother was a circus performer. Madame Hortense was the name she rode under."

Jim stared at Joe with open mouth.

"Your mother in the profesh?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Well, I can't say I ever heard of her—but that's not strange," said the ring-master slowly. "I haven't been in the business all my life. But if your mother was a circus rider then you know. Shake!"

He held out a powerful hand. Joe gripped it none the less powerfully.

"Say, you've got some hold!" exclaimed the ring-master with admiration in his voice. "Better think my offer over."

"I'd like to," answered Joe, "but I'd better stick where I am for the present."

"Well, you know best. But if you ever decide to join—you can always find our advance route bookings in one of the theatrical papers. Drop me a line."

Joe promised to do so, and went outside, perhaps hoping for a sight of Miss Morton. But he did not see her. He did, however, see much that interested him in the way of circus life, and he understood something of the fascination it had for his mother, especially as she was such an accomplished horsewoman; and feats of horsemanship are nowhere better appreciated than in a circus.

"Well, did you see all you wanted?" asked Benny Turton, as Joe rejoined him.

"Yes, I saw lots. Even got an offer to go with the show."

"You didn't!"

"Yes I did," and Joe narrated his experience.

"Say, I think maybe you'd make out good in a circus," said Benny, holding up his scaly suit for a close examination. He wanted no more leaks in it.

"No, I'll stick to magic for a while yet," Joe answered. "But I think you'll be busy soon, getting ready for the performance, so I'll leave you. Remember, I'm coming to see you do your stunt."

"I hope you do."

As Professor Rosello was not going to give a show that evening, Joe was free. He went to the afternoon and evening circus performances, and he tried to tell himself that it was to watch the "human fish" and some other special acts. But though Benny's act was interesting and startling, Joe paid more attention to the riding of Miss Helen Morton and the tricks of her horse, Rosebud, than he did to Benny. And the performance of Mademoiselle Mortonti was well worth watching. It was a beautiful exhibition of horsemanship on the part of a refined young girl, and it brought forth round after round of applause, in which Joe joined enthusiastically.

The circus moved out of town after the final

performance, and Joe and the professor gave their show.

They did not draw as large crowds as they would have done had not the counter attraction of the circus operated against them, but they did fairly well.

Joe introduced a new trick, which made an instant hit. It was very simple, too.

When his turn came to occupy the stage he advanced with a candle and a box of matches in his hand.

"Fire is a mysterious element," he stated. "It is a good servant but a bad master. Well controlled, fire and light are very useful. Now I have here a candle which is exceptionally well educated. That is it can be lighted, extinguished and lighted again by the mere movement of my wand.

"Now I don't say every one can do this, for you have not all of you magic wands. But, lest some of you think the trick is easy, I am going to ask one of you to come up here and light this candle. Will you come?" and he indicated a young man in a front seat. After some hesitation the youth ascended the stage.

"Do you know which end of a match to light?" asked Joe. The youth grinningly admitted that he did. Joe then handed him a candle and bade him light it. When it was aglow Joe handed the

youth the wand, and told him to point it at the candle.

"Just point it at the flame, and order it to go out—vamoose!" Joe ordered. The youth tried this, but the candle still burned on. "I guess you'll have to speak louder," observed Joe with a smile, "the candle may be deaf."

Accordingly the youth shouted, but still the candle burned.

"Louder!" urged Joe, and the youth fairly yelled. But still the candle burned brightly. "You see not every one has the magic power," stated the young performer. "Now let me show you how it is done."

"Just help this young man down the steps," Joe directed his assistant, the boy previously referred to. "I am afraid he may have strained himself shouting."

There was a laugh at this, and the audience watched Joe's helper solicitously assisting the volunteer down the steps.

While this was going on Joe had taken the lighted candle and had walked back with it to one of his tables, on which he placed it.

"Now I will show you how it is done," he said. "Ah, the wind has blown out the candle, but as the wind can not light it again I will first do so with a match, and we will then call on the forces of magic to do the rest."

Joe lighted the candle, and then, standing some

little distance from the table on which the glowing taper stood, he pointed his wand at it, and cried:

"Out, candle!"

Immediately the candle was extinguished.

"No, I didn't blow it out." Joe said, pretending that some one in the audience had said that. "To prove it I will, without moving, light it from where I stand." Then he exclaimed:

"Candle, light!"

At once the candle leaped into a glow. There were surprised exclamations at this, and Joe repeated the trick several times.

"It is very easy when you know how," he said, "and to prove there is no trick about it I will pass the candle down to you for examination." Joe tossed a candle among the audience. Several examined it. There was no doubt that it was just an ordinary candle.

"How did he do it?" every one asked.

The secret lay in a trick candle. The first one Joe lighted for the young man was an ordinary taper. Once blown out it could not be lighted except with a match.

But when Joe had his helper assist the young man down off the stage, the young magician took advantage of the fun and confusion over this to substitute on his table a trick candle for the ordinary one.

This trick candle consisted of a metal tube,

painted white, and made to look exactly like a candle, with a metal point at the top to represent a wick. Inside the hollow metal tube was a small wax taper, a miniature candle, and it was held up near the top by an inside, spiral spring. The spring was strong enough to carry up the taper as fast as it burned, but could be pulled down by a black silk thread, coming out at the bottom of the candle stick, and extending across the stage through the draperies, where it was held by Professor Rosello, who helped Joe in this illusion.

Joe quickly substituted the trick candle for the real one and lighted it, pretending that the wind had blown that one out as he walked to the table.

With the trick candle aglow, Joe only had to take his position where he pleased, and order the candle to go out. At once Professor Rosello, behind the scenes, pulled the black thread, invisible to the audience. The taper, still lighted, was pulled down inside the hollow metal candle stick, and, of course, it seemed just as if it went out. It was still burning, however, some small air holes on the back of the tube, where they could not be seen, providing the oxygen.

When Joe, pointing the other end of his wand at the candle, ordered it to light, Professor Rosello released the string, and the concealed spring raised the still lighted taper into view, so that the candle appeared to light itself in a mysterious manner.

Thus Joe did the trick, which was received very well, causing quite a sensation. Professor Rosello complimented him on its success.

It was toward the close of the performance. Joe was about to step down off the stage to pass through the audience with a vase for examination, when he looked to the back of the hall, and there, to his great surprise, he saw the vindictive face of his foster-father, Deacon Blackford. Joe gasped, and quickly turned back. Under pretense of arranging the trick with the professor, Joe whispered:

"My foster-father is out in the audience. He must have been following me and he has come here to arrest me. He thinks I stole that money, but I didn't. I don't want to be falsely arrested. What shall I do?"

The professor thought quickly.

"It was a narrow escape," he said. "He almost caught you. He is probably waiting for you to come down in the crowd so he can grab you. Quick now. Go behind the scenes. I'll hold the audience with some patter. Then you tell the boy to come out and help me with this trick. He can do it as well as you, as it is very simple. I'll finish the rest of the show alone."

"But what shall I do?" asked Joe.

"Slip out by the stage door, go to the hotel, get your things and take the first train for Seneca. We show there next. I'll come on as soon as I can

pack up after the show. We'll fool the deacon. There is no need of being arrested if you are innocent, and it is evident he came here to take you into custody. It's a good thing you saw him in time."

Joe hurried back of the scenes, while Professor Rosello held the attention of the audience, including that of Deacon Blackford.

CHAPTER XXII

STRANGE NEWS

BECAUSE of what had happened and the trouble that might be caused to Joe should his foster-father cause his arrest, Professor Rosello made a change in the end of his show. He substituted some simple tricks for the more elaborate feats of magic in which he needed Joe's help.

Still he kept the audience amused, and that was the main point. Professor Rosello even saw Deacon Blackford laughing at some of the tricks and the "patter" which accompanied them. But immediately after he smiled, the stern man became more stern, as though ashamed of himself for having given way to mirth.

"I guess he'll find out, if he lives long enough," thought the performer, "that circus people and magicians aren't as black as they are painted."

The professor was thoroughly impressed with the belief in Joe's innocence, and he did not want to see him subjected to the humiliation of an arrest.

"Innocent as he is, and as I believe him to be," thought the professor, "it would take time to prove

it, and it would delay my show. It may make him look guilty to run away in this fashion, but I believe it the best way. Later on, if necessary, Joe can give himself up and explain."

Meanwhile Joe, having the same idea, was making his way out of the stage door of the theatre. He hurried to the hotel, packed up his belongings and took a train to the next town. The professor and the baggage would come by a later train.

"That was a narrow escape," mused Joe, as he hurried away. "I wonder how he found me?"

The answer to that question was not difficult.

Professor Rosello went on with the performance. Among other tricks was the one of making the arithmetic sum appear on the slate—the trick Joe had explained to his chums the day the fireworks factory burned.

Another was the producing of hundreds of feet of colored paper, in the shape of a ribbon, and scores of paper flowers from a hat borrowed from some one in the audience. The hat was shown empty, and immediately thereafter the performer, putting in the end of his wand, proceeded to wind out on it yard after yard of paper ribbon. Next he shook out paper flowers, so that with the ribbon, they made quite a pile on the table—a pile much larger than the hat itself.

"I didn't know you carried all that stuff with you, sir," said the professor to the man whose hat

he had borrowed. "You must find it quite a burden.

"And that isn't all, either," went on the performer. He looked closely into the hat, a puzzled look came over his face, and he asked: "Have you a permit to carry live stock about with you?"

"Live stock?" repeated the man, wonderingly.

"Yes. I see something alive in here. Here it is," and, putting in his hand, which was seen to be empty, while the other grasped the hat by the brim, the professor pulled out a live and kicking guinea pig.

The audience laughed heartily at this, and the professor tried to put back into the hat the heap of paper ribbon, flowers and the live animal. Of course, they would not fit.

"Well," went on the performer, with a puzzled air, "*you* may be able to get all those things in your hat, my dear sir, but *I* can't, though I was able to get them out."

He then piled the paper ribbon and flowers on the head covering and passed it to the man. The guinea pig was taken in charge by the young assistant to be used on the next occasion.

It need hardly be explained that Professor Rosello put all the articles in the hat ("loaded" it, to use the magician's term) as he walked back with it from where he had borrowed it to the stage. The guinea pig, which had been used so often in the trick that it was very tame, and would

lie quietly where placed, was first put in the bottom of the hat while it was held close to the lower part of the performer's vest. He had the little animal under there, putting it in its hiding place just before he was ready to work the trick.

The paper ribbon and flowers he had concealed in a secret pocket, and these he slipped into the hat with the pig on his way up the stage steps. He was now ready for the trick.

Paper ribbon for this purpose comes wound in tight rolls, and can be bought in any conjuring-goods store. It rolls up into a very compact mass, but when unwound, and fluffed up, occupies much greater space, so that what seems to be a bushel or more can be taken from an ordinary derby.

The paper flowers are in the same class. They come in compact form, in bundles. A bundle, which can easily be palmed, is dropped into the hat. A pressure of the thumb breaks the binding, and the tiny wire springs in the petals of the flowers cause them to expand, thus occupying a much larger space than before, so that the hat seems to be overflowing with them. Under the paper ribbon and the flowers was the guinea pig. The outside wrapping of the compact bundles of ribbon and flowers is made black, so that it is not seen against the dark background of the hat's interior.

And it might be stated here that no matter what trick of this character is done by a magician,

it may be set down as a safe rule that nothing ever comes out of a hat, a vase, a box or anything else, unless it has first gone in. So if a magician takes a live pig out of a hat, it is very certain he first put it there. Of course, how he gets it there is his trick—he does it so quickly and deftly that one fails to see him. Certainly, one cannot fold a guinea pig up into a packet the size of a pill box, as one can yards and yards of paper ribbon, but there are ways of getting it in a hat which differ with each conjurer.

The show was over, the audience departed, having passed an enjoyable evening, and Professor Rosello was putting away his apparatus when he saw a man walking down the aisle toward the stage. He suspected this was Joe's foster-father and the suspicion was made a certainty a moment later.

"You had a young man working for you on the stage, didn't you?" asked the deacon. "He was here a while ago."

"Yes, I have an assistant. Here, boy!" Professor Rosello called.

"No, I don't mean that one," said the deacon, as the small lad came out. "I mean the other. Joe Strong his name is."

"Oh, Joe. Yes," said the professor slowly. "Well, he's gone."

"Gone?" The deacon looked startled. "I was waiting for him."

"Well, he's gone," went on the professor. "He's far away from here now. Perhaps if he had known you wanted him he would have waited."

"Oh, no, he wouldn't!" exclaimed the deacon. "He knew what I wanted all right—that is if he saw me, which I didn't think he did. I want him on a charge of robbery. He also set fire to my place, though I don't say he did that on purpose. However, he's got to pay for the damage. But where is he? I've got a warrant for him."

"He's gone, I tell you," insisted the professor.

"Well, I'll find him," stormed the old man. "I traced him here and I'll trace him farther. One of the boys from our town saw him a few weeks ago, and Joe sent a message to me, saying he didn't take the money. But I know he did. I made up my mind I'd get him, and I heard your show was coming here. So I came here to wait for Joe. He may have run away again, but I'll get him. I'll have him locked up for robbing me!"

"Well, you'll have to settle that with him," observed the professor, coolly. "I know nothing about it, except that I believe Joe is innocent."

"Well, I don't!" exclaimed the deacon. "And I'll get him yet! You tell him that for me!" and he shook his fist as he went out of the now dark theatre.

"I think he means trouble," mused the professor, as he prepared to take the train.

As arranged, Joe and the professor met later that night in the town where they were next to show. Professor Rosello told of his interview with the deacon.

"He surely is after you, Joe," he added.

"Well, I'll have to be on the lookout; that's all," decided the boy wizard. "I'm not going to be punished for something I didn't do."

Three days after this, having arrived at a large town where they were to remain two nights, Professor Rosello came to the theatre in the afternoon to see if Joe had everything in readiness for the evening's show.

"Joe," remarked the magician, as he noted that his young helper had left nothing undone, "Joe, did your foster-father ever have any business dealings with two men whose first names were Burke and Jake?"

"Burke and Jake," repeated Joe, thoughtfully. "I don't know that he did. You see he was in the feed business, and lots of men came to sell to him, or buy. I wouldn't know half of them, though I often helped about the store. Why do you ask that, Professor?"

"Well, it's a strange sort of thing, and there may be nothing in it," went on the professor. "But I was just down at the hotel, having a bit of lunch, and at the table next to mine were two men. They called each other Burke and Jake,

and in the course of their talk they mentioned Deacon Blackford's name several times."

"They did?"

"Yes, and not only that, but they knew about the theft of the money from him and Mrs. Blackford."

"Well, I suppose the deacon has pretty well advertised the loss," said Joe, "so there isn't anything so strange in that."

"No, perhaps not," admitted the professor, slowly. "But here is the strange part of it, Joe.

"Those two men—I didn't catch their last names—not only seemed to know about the loss, but they laughed over it as though it were a good joke. In fact, I should say, just from a casual observation and from what I heard, that they knew more about the theft than even the deacon himself."

"You think they do?"

"That's my impression."

"Maybe they were detectives," Joe suggested. "The deacon would call in the police, and they might be on my trail. I wonder if I had better get out while I have the chance?"

"I wouldn't do that," said the professor. "These men weren't detectives, I'm sure of that. But they certainly laughed about the deacon's loss in a knowing way."

"I wonder who they are," mused Joe.

CHAPTER XXIII

"I'VE GOT YOU!"

JOE had been reading a letter when Professor Rosello came in with the strange news about the two men. The letter was from Benny Turton, the "human fish," of Sampson Brothers' Circus, and was in response to a souvenir postcard Joe had sent the lad, hardly expecting a reply. Joe had just done it as a kind remembrance to the lad to whom he had given a little help.

But Benny wrote rather a long letter in reply, Joe having given his future address. In the letter Benny said that he was not feeling well, but that he still had to go on with his tank act.

"I rather wish, some days, that I had your work," he wrote. "I gave your regards, as you requested, to Jim Tracy and Miss Morton. They wish to be remembered to you. Miss Morton wants to know if you are ever going to join a circus."

Joe smiled in reflective fashion as he folded the letter and put it in his pocket. So Helen Morton,

"Mademoiselle Mortonti," had not forgotten him, nor had the ring-master, though their acquaintanceship was of the briefest. Joe was glad they had remembered him—particularly glad in the case of Helen.

But, for the time being, the letter was put aside. Joe's mind was busy trying to conjecture who the two men at the hotel could be.

"I wonder if I'd better go down and see if I can't get a look at them without their seeing me?" he asked Professor Rosello.

"I wouldn't, Joe," was the advice. "If I'm any judge they'll be at the show to-night, and you can see them then."

"What makes you think they'll be here?"

"Because I heard one of them ask what sort of show ours was. There are posters in the hotel you know. The other man said it wasn't half bad—quite a compliment to us, Joe. And the first one remarked, as they had nothing to do to-night, they might as well take in our performance. So we may see them in the audience."

"Do you think they know I'm with you?"

"I don't see how they can. You don't recall them, and it isn't likely they'd know you."

"All right, then I'll be on the lookout for them," Joe decided. "It sure is queer, though, that they should make a joke about the deacon's loss."

"That's the way it struck me," agreed the pro-

fessor. "Now how about the tricks to-night? Have you the pigeons and the canary?"

"Yes," answered Joe. "But I'm not just sure of what I am to do."

"Then we'll have a little rehearsal."

Joe was a little nervous that evening as the time for the performance drew near and the theatre began to fill. He was not at all alarmed at the part he was to play on the stage, for he had become used to that now. But he wanted to see the strange men, to ascertain if, by any possible chance, they could be some of the customers of his foster-father—customers he might have seen about the feed and grain place.

"I'll point them out to you if I see them," said the professor, as he was getting into his dress suit—the suit that had about it so many pockets, hidden in various places, so that articles could be gotten rid of or produced at will. Joe now had a suit like this, since he did almost as many tricks as Professor Rosello himself.

"I may not be able to see them very well from the stage," Joe remarked.

"Well then, you can invent some excuse to go down in the audience. Work one of the simple card tricks, or something like that." For Joe was becoming adept in manipulating cards, allowing persons to choose cards, thrust them back into the pack without his seeing them, and picking them

out again. Of course, this was all done either by "forcing" certain cards, known in advance, or by clever cutting, shuffling the cards falsely, or by prepared trick cards.

"Well, that might do," agreed Joe. "We'll just have to trust to luck."

The curtain went up, and the usual procedure was gone through with. Joe noticed that the professor was paying more attention than usual to the audience, carefully scrutinizing every section of the hall. But if he saw the two suspicious men he gave no sign to Joe.

There were two new tricks to be performed that evening. One was the production of two doves in a seemingly empty cage, causing them to materialize from guinea pigs.

Another illusion was to seemingly burn up a canary bird, and bring it to life again.

The first trick went off well. A large bird cage was shown on a table. There was nothing in it, as far as could be seen. Professor Rosello took two small, live guinea pigs, which he said he would put into a tin cylinder on a second table, and at the firing of a pistol the guinea pigs would disappear, being changed into doves in the empty cage.

He did just as he said he would do. The guinea pigs were put in the tin cylinder and the cover clapped on. The performer aimed a stage pistol

at the tin, fired, and with the flash and report two white doves were seen fluttering in the cage. The tin cylinder, being opened, was seen to be empty.

The trick was mechanical, of course. As soon as the guinea pigs were put in the cylinder, they slipped down through a false bottom, and through a trap in the table, to a little box made to receive them. That left the cylinder empty.

The bird cage was a trick one. As the audience looked at it while it stood on the table, it seemed to be an ordinary cage. But behind it was a black velvet curtain which concealed from view the fact that the back of the cage was double. It was as if the bottom of the cage had been folded up against the rear, and in between the false bottom and the back, was a place large enough to hold two white doves.

When the pistol was fired Joe, behind the scenes, pulled a black silk thread that let the false side fall down, and become a second bottom of the cage. The falling away of the side allowed the doves to flutter from their concealed hiding place into the cage, where they seemed to appear so miraculously.

The trick with the canary was worked differently. A live canary was shown. It was placed in a light paper bag, the mouth tied, and the bag and canary

were hung in the center of a target suspended on the stage by wires. After the usual "patter" a rifle was fired at the suspended bag. To make the trick more effective some one in the audience was allowed to shoot at the canary in the bag. As he did so the bag burst into flames, disappeared and, where the target had been, there suddenly appeared a bird cage with a live canary in it.

The trick was worked as follows:

Two canaries were used. Before the trick was performed one was put into a trick cage which, when suspended from the stage with its top toward the audience, seemed to be a target. There was a paper target and bull's-eye in fact, but it closed up by springs at the proper time, and did not show on top of the cage, which contained a live canary in a secret compartment.

This piece of apparatus was in place before the trick started. The professor put a live canary in a paper bag. That is, he seemed to do so. In reality the canary was safely hidden in a compartment of a table near which the professor stood with the bag. This was sleight-of-hand work. The bag was made of a special kind of paper which would burn instantly, with a flash of fire when ignited, something like flash-light powder.

Professor Rosello appeared to hang the paper bag, inside of which was the canary, in front of the bull's-eye. As a matter of fact, there was

nothing in the paper bag. But it was hung near a little electrical device, from which ran wires back of the rear stage draperies. Behind the curtains Joe was concealed.

When all was ready the professor handed some one in the audience a stage gun that fired no missile—only making a report. The man was told to aim at the paper bag in front of the target, and did so.

"Fire!" called the professor, after some talk in which he professed uneasiness for the safety of the audience.

At the sound of the report the paper bag disappeared in a flash of flame and smoke. The target also disappeared, and there, hanging from its supporting wires, was a bird cage with a live canary in it.

When the gun was fired Joe, behind the scenes, pressed the button of the electrical device. A tiny flame appeared, set fire to the prepared bag, which at once went up in smoke. At the same time Joe pulled a black silk thread connected with the bird-cage which, with its top presented to the audience, looked like a target. The target was folded away out of sight, and the bird cage, which was a collapsible one, expanded to its regular shape, the second canary fluttering about as soon as released from the secret compartment where it had been hidden all the while.

Thus was a bird seemingly burned, only to be reincarnated. It was an effective illusion.

It was now time for Joe's disappearing trick, and while he was taking his place on the prepared chair over the trap door in the stage, and while the professor was putting the black sheet over him, he managed to whisper to Joe:

"Look at the two men in the seventh row in the two end seats on your right."

"I see them," said Joe in a low voice.

"They are the ones I heard talking at the hotel. Do you know them?"

The professor asked this in between his "patter" which went with the disappearing trick.

"Their faces seem familiar," Joe said, as the veil went over his head. "But I'm not sure I know them. I'll see them after the show."

There were a few more illusions, and the performance came to a close. Joe, not stopping to change his clothes, started down the aisle.

"I'll follow those men," he said to the professor, who nodded a permission.

But as Joe reached the lobby of the theatre, intending to question the men, if he could stop them, he fell back in astonishment at the sight of his foster-father and Hen Sylvester, one of the Bedford constables.

"Ha! There he is!" cried the deacon. "I've got you now!" and he made a grab for Joe.

CHAPTER XXIV

CAUGHT

Joe did not know what to do. He could not very well run away through that crowd. To do so would be such a confession of guilt that almost any officer would arrest him. And Hen Sylvester certainly would take after him, creating a scene.

On the other hand, if Joe was delayed the men would get away. And he wanted to know more about them. He looked hurriedly around but did not see them. The deacon misinterpreted this look, for he cried in angry tones

"Look out for him, Hen! He's trying to escape. Grab him!"

"Oh, I'll grab him all right!" cried the constable. "He got away from me once, on the freight, but he won't now."

The officer made a grab for Joe and an excited crowd gathered about. Joe made up his mind quickly.

"Look here, Dad," he said, giving his foster-parent the name he often used. "Don't make a scene here. There's no use using violence. I'll go with you quietly. You're making a big mistake, for I can explain everything."

"You can't explain away about my——"

"Hush," cautioned Hen. For he liked Joe, and did not want it published to the crowd that the lad was suspected of theft.

"Gentlemen, will you come with me?" interrupted Professor Rosello, who had followed Joe

to the lobby. "Come to my dressing room, where we can talk matters over quietly," he went on. "It's all right," he said to the crowd and to the theatrical employees who had gathered about. "Just a mistake, that's all. This way, gentlemen."

"But those men!" exclaimed Joe. "They'll get away!"

"We'll have to take chances on that," the professor whispered to him. "Maybe they'll stay at the hotel all night. But you must take the deacon and the officer out of this. We'll talk to them in my room."

Joe saw the wisdom of this, and a little later he was facing the angry dealer and the constable.

"Now then," began the professor, "what's it all about?"

"It's about this boy," said the deacon, sternly. "He robbed me of considerable money. He robbed my wife, too, and set fire to the place, but I put it out. That's what the matter is!"

"And I have a warrant for his arrest," went on Hen Sylvester. "He is charged with robbery."

"I never took a cent of yours, nor Mrs. Blackford's either!" cried Joe, "and I don't know anything about a fire. I did run away from your house, because I could stand it no longer."

Then, in impassiond tones, he told the story of that eventful night—how he had caught the freight and met the professor. He spoke briefly of his work as a magician.

"What makes you think he robbed you?" asked the magician of the deacon.

"Why, I saw him leaving by the window, and right after that I missed the papers and the money."

"Did you see Joe's face?"

"No. But I know it was him."

"It wasn't," said Joe. "I never stole in my life. Listen, Deacon Blackford. You were robbed—of that there's no doubt—but it was by some one else. When you stopped me just now, I was on the trail of some men who undoubtedly know something about the crime."

Rapidly, earnestly, Joe told about the two men—the men who had joked about the deacon's loss, the men he had tried to follow from the theatre.

"Their names were Burke and Jake," he said. "Do you know who they were?" and he turned to his foster-father.

"Burke and Jake! Burke Denton and Jake Harrison!" murmured the deacon. "I—I never thought of them! The papers—the investment papers—they were taken with the money—why—why——"

He seemed lost in thought for a moment.

"Look here!" he finally said. "I'm not saying you didn't rob me, Joe, but I'm a Christian, and I don't want to accuse anybody unjustly. It is true that the men you speak of might have done it. Where can they be found?"

"I don't know—now," answered Joe.

Joe pleaded his case earnestly. He went over every detail of his escape from the deacon's house that night, and described every movement so minutely that an unprejudiced listener could not help believing him.

"You and Jim chased me," he said to Hem Sylvester. "I didn't want to stop for fear of missing the train. I suppose that did look sort of guilty."

"It sure did," agreed Hen.

"But you know what time the train left. You saw me jump in the box car," went on Joe. "And you," turning to the deacon, "know what time it

was when you saw some one getting out of the window. Now could I have gotten from the house to the train in that difference of time?"

The deacon and the constable thought a moment. The deacon mentioned the time he had seen the robber escaping, and it was evident that Joe could not have been in two places at once.

"Well, I guess that practically clears you," admitted Sylvester. "I don't see as we have any use for this warrant, Deacon," and he produced the paper.

"Save it," said Joe with a smile. "Maybe you can change the names and use it on those two men. We'll see if we can catch them. What kind of investment papers did they take from you?" he asked the deacon.

"Some like this," and the deacon produced a bond. "It's the only one they overlooked."

"May I borrow it?" asked Joe.

The deacon let him take it, and then all four of them left the theatre, it not being necessary to take away any of the "props," as another performance was to be given the next night.

"We'll go to the hotel," suggested Joe. "It's just possible the men may be there. They haven't anything to suspect unless they saw you," he said to the deacon.

"No, I don't believe they saw us," said Hen. "We didn't get here until after dark. The deacon read in the paper that your show was here, so he got me, and we took the late afternoon train from Bedford."

A glance in the hotel lobby did not disclose the two men, but in the cafe they were seen sitting at a table. A look through the swinging doors showed this.

"Have you authority to make arrests here?" asked Joe of the constable.

"Yes, this is in the same county as Bedford."

"Then go in and arrest those two men. I'm sure they're guilty."

"And I am too," said the deacon. "Take 'em in, Hen. I'll swear out a warrant against 'em!"

That was all the constable needed. He had authority for his act now. He marched into the cafe, the deacon, Joe and the professor following.

"I arrest you in the name of the law!" exclaimed Sylvester, laying a hand each on the two men's shoulders. "You're caught and you've got to come with me!"

Denton and Harrison started up, but at the sight of the deacon sank back in their chairs. Before they could move the constable had snapped handcuffs on them.

CHAPTER XXV

JOE'S CLEVER TRICK

"What's the joke?" demanded Jake Harrison, with a sort of sneer as he looked at the handcuffs on his wrists. "If this is one of your conjuring tricks, you've come to the wrong shop," and he glared at the professor.

"It isn't any trick," put in Joe, "except that we've turned a trick against you. You're both under arrest."

"There! What did I tell you!" whined Burke Denton. "I said if we——"

"Stop your noise!" savagely ordered his companion. "Now then, what does all this mean?" he went on. "What right have you to arrest us?"

"The right of the law," put in Sylvester, who

seemed to enjoy the role he was playing. "I'm constable all over Folsom county, and you're my prisoners!"

"On what charge?" demanded Harrison. "You keep still!" he directed his companion as he saw Denton about to speak. "I'll run this end of the show. What's the charge against us?" he asked fiercely.

"Robbing me and my wife of money—about one hundred and forty dollars," said the deacon.

"What proof have you?" asked Harrison, sneeringly. "Did you see us take the money?"

"I saw one of you getting out of the window after the money was gone," went on the deacon. This was practically admitting that Joe was not guilty.

"Which one of us did you see?" asked Harrison.

"I—er—I er——" the deacon hesitated. He could not positively state which of the twain it was. He had seen no face, and the room was not well lighted.

"It wasn't only money that was taken, was it, Deacon?" asked Joe, for he was now ready to take a hand in the proceedings.

"No. It was securities—papers that you two alone knew the value of," said the deacon, quickly. "You took the investment papers, Denton and Harrison, I'm sure you did!"

Harrison laughed.

"You'll have to have some better proof than just being sure we did it," he said. "That won't go in law. Now you'd better take these ornaments off us, and let us go," he ordered Hen Sylvester. "You haven't a single bit of evidence against us, and if you persist in arresting us we'll sue for false im-

prisonment. You haven't a bit of evidence!"

"Haven't we? What's this?" cried Joe Strong, suddenly.

With a quick motion, he drew from an inner pocket of Burke Denton's coat a folded bond paper. At the sight of it Denton's jaw dropped, and even Harrison's eyes opened wide in astonishment.

"There's one of the stolen securities now in your possession," said Joe calmly. "Isn't that evidence enough?"

"How—how did that get in my pocket?" asked Denton. "I thought you had 'em all, Harrison. I told you not to be so careless with 'em, and now ——"

"Keep still, can't you!" fairly yelled the other. "Do you want to put us in——"

Then he himself stopped, as if conscious that he was saying too much.

Denton had collapsed in his chair. Harrison, also, seemed to have wilted. There was now practically no doubt of the men's guilt. Hen Sylvester locked them up in the local jail until such time as he could arrange to transfer them to Bedford. Neither of the prisoners protested any further.

"Say, Joe, how did you know that investment bond was in his pocket?" asked the constable a little later.

"Because I put it there," was the reply. "It was the one I took from the deacon. I thought I might have a use for it. It was just a little sleight-of-hand work, making it seem as if it came from his pocket."

"Well, it—it was a good trick," grudgingly admitted Mr. Blackford.

"Then you don't think I'm guilty; do you?" asked Joe.

The deacon shook his head. He seemed quite ashamed of himself.

"If I was you, Deacon," said Hen, in a whisper to the old man, "I'd sort of beg Joe's pardon for suspecting him. You know he could make it hot for you if he wanted to."

"How?"

"Sue you for false arrest, for humiliating him in a crowd, and all that. You'd better conciliate him."

This the deacon did, not altogether willingly.

"I—I'm sorry I tried to have you arrested, Joe," he said. "I admit I was wrong in thinking you robbed me."

"Oh, that's all right," said Joe, easily. He could afford to forgive now. "It did look a bit suspicious against me for a while. But I'm glad you have the right men. I don't want to be in fear of arrest as I travel about with the professor. And I don't suppose you want to take me home, do you?"

"Well, no, perhaps not, under the circumstances," replied the deacon, slowly. "I admit that maybe I wasn't altogether right in the way I treated you, Joe. But I meant it for the best. You can stay with the professor, if you like. You seem to be doing well."

"Indeed he is!" exclaimed Mr. Crabb. "He's a wonder!"

"Then stay," the deacon said. The truth was he felt he would be made fun of if he brought Joe back, after having stated as publicly as he had in Bedford that he believed his foster-son guilty of the robbery. Besides, the deacon had to admit that Joe was doing better away from him than with him.

"Yes, I guess you'd better stay and be one of

them trick performers, though I don't think much of——"

There is little more to tell of this story. The next morning the deacon and Hen Sylvester went back to Bedford, taking the two prisoners with them. Eventually the rascals were convicted of the crime and sent to jail. The deacon recovered his valuable papers, but not the money. That had been spent.

"Well, I suppose you will avail yourself of your foster-father's permission and remain with me, won't you?" asked Professor Rosello, at the conclusion of the next night's performance, when they were getting ready to move on to the next town.

"Oh, yes, I'll stay for a while," said Joe. "I still have much to learn." But, as he said this, he saw in fancy a certain pretty face, and he beheld a girl riding about a circus ring on a beautiful horse. Joe thought of Helen Morton, of Benny Turton, the "human fish," and of the kind ringmaster. Joe was beginning to feel a new and strange pull at his heart strings.

And how it resulted may be learned by reading the next volume of this series, to be entitled: "Joe Strong on the Trapeze; or, The Daring Feats of a Young Circus Performer."

"What are you thinking of, Joe?" asked the professor as they sat in the train that night.

"A new trick," was the answer. "You take a horse named Rosebud and you——"

"What! A horse on the stage?" cried the professor, in wonder.

"Oh—er—I—I was thinking of something else," murmured Joe. And so for a while we will take leave of Joe Strong.

The End

Joe Strong
the Boy
Wizard